

**Style and Experience as a Dichotomy in Criticism of the  
Novels of Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing and J G Ballard**

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## Abstract

This thesis is a survey of the critical responses to the work of Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing and J G Ballard, combined with close readings of three of their novels, these being Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, and Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*. My primary contention is that the criticism of the work of these three authors is distinguished by a dichotomy between critics focusing on elements described as 'experiential', the novels as subjective evocations of real-world phenomena, and those focusing on elements described as 'stylistic', the novels as technical exercises. Drawing on the work of Shosana Felman, this dichotomy is seen to result from a careful balance maintained in the fiction itself between stylistic and experiential elements. Though the entire body of criticism mirrors the nature of the fiction it analyses, in attempting to interpret these novels individual critics upset the balance these works strive for between experience and style. In contrast this thesis aims for a reading of Rhys, Lessing and Ballard's work which retains this balance. In particular the three novels mentioned above are read as ambiguous works of literature which largely frustrate definitive interpretation.

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### List of Abbreviations

*GMM* = Rhys, Jean, *Good Morning, Midnight*. London, Penguin, 1969

*GN* = Lessing, Doris, *The Golden Notebook*. London : Harper Perennial, 2007

*AE* = Ballard, J G, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. London, Fourth Estate, 2006

## Introduction

This thesis is an exploration of the way that critics of the novels of Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing and J G Ballard re-enact and, at the same time, neglect a dichotomy present in the fiction itself. On one side of this divide are those critics who see the novels as distillations of the experience of a particular individual, drawing upon the way the novels of all three authors rely upon the perspective of a central figure as a mimetic device. In the case of the criticism of Rhys and Lessing, this perspective is linked to the personal experience of the author. The term which I feel best describes both the perspective of these critics and the textual elements they draw upon is 'experiential'. For experiential critics these novels seek to deploy or construct a unified and independent subjectivity as a remedy to the insufficiency of social language to describe reality. On the other side are those critics who highlight the depersonalising nature of the style of these novels, a focus on formal features and isolated ironic touches which I term 'stylistic'. The stylistic approach to the novels of these authors contradicts the subjective meaning drawn from them by experiential critics. The reason for the contradiction between these two critical approaches is found in the ambiguous nature of the novels themselves. Though subjectivity is of central importance to the novels of all three authors, the linguistic style each of them uses to express it undermines the reliability of individual experience as a way of understanding reality.

Ballard, Lessing and Rhys draw heavily on their own experience in their fiction, though this is also undermined in the same way as the experience of their protagonists. Lessing, though affirming that her goal in beginning "The Children of Violence" series of novels was partially

autobiographical, also asserts that it tells a different kind of truth in comparison with a literal autobiography (Lessing, 1995, p. 161-162). In Lessing's fiction itself, a novelist character in *The Four-Gated City*, Mark, encounters the reading public's mania for reading an author's life in their fiction, which in this case represents a wholesale ignorance of the possibility that an author may differ from his characters (Lessing, 1969, pp. 274-275, 519). Ballard displays his ambivalence in a more subtle way. Though accepting after the fact that his surreal childhood may have unconsciously influenced his fiction, Ballard wrote three separate, nominally 'autobiographical', accounts of this period in *Empire of the Sun*, *The Kindness of Women* and his autobiography proper *Miracles of Life* (Ballard, 2008d, p. 251). The differences between these narratives support the importance of a conflict that I believe exists within all three authors' works between the 'truth' of experience and the stylistic requirements of fictional form. Examples given below, including the way Ballard intervened in a critical debate over *Crash* to defend its inscrutability, the way Rhys's works purposefully puncture the sense of empathy they construct between reader and protagonist and the way Lessing takes issue with what she sees as reductive interpretations of the meanings of her work, support the existence of a careful balance within these novels.

While the entire body of the criticism of the work of these authors reflects their ambiguous division, for this very reason, individual critical readings are insufficient. The way style and experience contradict each other in these novels is a central part of their meaning, making the way they frustrate interpretation central to an inclusive reading of them as works of fiction. The critical repetition of the dichotomy between style and experience is, therefore, also a misunderstanding of its significance. This is similar in many ways to the echoes of the plot of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* which Shosana Felman identified

in its criticism. Felman contends that the meaning of James's novel is not only divided, but that *division* itself is the meaning (1977, pp. 113-114). The novel's critics, "In repeating as they do the primal scene of the text's meaning as division[...]can by no means master or exhaust the very meaning of that division, but only act the division out, perform it, be part of it" (Felman, 1977, p. 113). I would not describe Lessing, Ballard and Rhys's novels as being solely *about* division as an abstract concept – this would neglect the elements of their fictions which suggest that they are based on real-world experiences. However, the way that the indefiniteness of these novels mandates a search for definition on the part of critics makes Felman's perspective highly instructive for my own reading of the criticism of these authors. Like the critics of James's novel, the critics of these three authors "participate in a division" by neglecting either stylistic or experiential elements and rejecting the criticism built upon them; this participation is as such a "fight against division: it is indeed to commit oneself to the elimination of the opponent, and through him, to the elimination of the heterogeneity of meaning, the very scandal of contradiction and ambiguity" (Felman, 1977, p. 113).

In linking this critical dichotomy to one I identify in the fiction, I run the risk of 'participating' in the division of these texts myself, not least if I view my own perspective as somehow independent of the dichotomy that characterises the critical landscape. Many of the critics of each of these authors similarly preface their analyses of the fiction itself by representing existing criticism as insufficient or in some way lacking as a method of adequately understanding the fiction. As such, merely highlighting the dichotomy of criticism does not legitimate the evasion of the stylistic-experiential division of the text. In the below analysis of each author's work which accompanies my examination of criticism, I



try to abstain from interpretation insofar as this describes a reading of an oeuvre, novel or particular element as having a single, definite meaning. My goal is instead to observe the way these works retain their ambiguity; in doing this I hope to provide a new angle on the way they function as literature. I feel that part of the strength of the work of these three authors is the way they frustrate the attempt of a reader to take an interpretative position external to the contradiction of the text.

Because one of the purposes of the division in Rhys, Lessing and Ballard's novels between style and experience is to frustrate and delay interpretation, the use of extrinsic theory to interpret these works is equally insufficient in resolving their ambiguity. The first of the two contexts in which I use psychoanalytical theory is as an example of this insufficiency. Specifically, the sense of psychoanalysis as a form of psychic archaeology has much in common with the way that critics of these three authors present their readings as an excavation of the previously disregarded 'true' meaning of the novels under discussion. Freud himself frequently used the analogical description of psychoanalysis as a kind of archaeology, directed at the excavation and interpretation of repressed psychic material (Møller, 1991, p. 33). As Lis Møller remarks, "Archaeology is part of the language of psychoanalysis, or perhaps the metalanguage of psychoanalysis, the language in which psychoanalysis represents itself as a depth psychology or depth hermeneutics – an uncovering, a bringing to light, an unearthing, or an excavation of a hidden reality" (1991, pp. 33-34).

In this understanding, the psychoanalyst seeks to uncover hidden psychological material to remedy a perceived deficiency in what lies on the surface – remedying a 'conscious'

symptom which is in one sense a lack of meaning. 'Surface' conscious elements are less important than 'buried' unconscious ones, the former being only evidence of an insufficiency. Both experiential and stylistic critics approach Rhys, Lessing and Ballard's novels in a similar fashion, finding a deficiency in extant criticism which they then attempt to correct through a focus on the hidden and neglected. The obvious is less interesting to these critics than the concealed. My argument below is that this 'excavatory' approach functions in the case of these three authors' novels according to the stylistic-experiential split detailed above. For experiential critics such as Carole Angier, Roberta Rubenstein or Andrzej Gasiorek the hidden element corresponds to the experience of the protagonist as it is manifested in the phenomenological world of the novels' plots. For stylistic critics such as Paula Le Gallez, Molly Hite or Jeannette Baxter the hidden meaning of the novels comes from isolated elements neglected by previous critics, along with the technique and language employed in the way their stories are told. The ambiguity of the fiction of these three authors makes the act of interpretation an emphasis of either experience or style. It also involves the 'reburying' of the side of the novel which does not suit a critic's particular interpretation.

To an extent, therefore, psychoanalysis is useful partly as an example of an interpretative discipline that shares similarities with the literary criticism of these authors. Shosana Felman groups many early uses of Freudianism by literary critics under the label of "wild psychoanalysis" (1977, p. 108). This can be summarised as a use of psychoanalytical theory as a blunt instrument to secure the validity of an interpretation. The particular example Felman gives of this is Edmund Wilson's reading of repressed sexuality on the part of the protagonist of *The Turn of the Screw*, an argument strongly rooted in symbolism (1977, pp. 104-105; 108-111). In the same way, I take issue with the way critics such as Jeannette King

make 'diagnostic' use of theory, often psychoanalytical or psychological, for the purposes of literary interpretation. That being said, I do feel that a targeted use of psychoanalytical theory can support the observation of the ambiguous dichotomy present in these works and their criticism. Felman's own use of psychoanalysis is instructive here, most notably in her use of concepts taken from the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to explore the way that fictional texts can act as a trap for interpretation, evading the meaning we seek to impose on them (1977).

I use Lacan as an interesting parallel rather than a framework for interpretation. I agree with Peter Brooks's assessment that psychoanalytical literary criticism should avoid relying upon "the identifying and labelling of human relations in a psychoanalytic vocabulary" (Brooks, 1987, pp. 334-335). For my part, Lacan is valuable primarily because of his positing of a complex topological model of the unconscious in preference to an "archaeological" map of the human mind. Rather than present the mind as a 'map' with the conscious mind above and the unconscious below, Lacan described the relationship between the conscious and unconscious as similar to a Möbius strip (Lacan, 1975 p. 22; Lacan, 2006, p. 306-307). In this model, it is not the nature of either side that is interesting but their orientation. The Möbius strip, along with what it draws in meaning from Lacan's deployment of it as a psychological model, is vital to this thesis because of the way it removes the diagnostic imperative from psychoanalytical literary criticism. Just as the division between the two sides of a Möbius strip is a local effect making the sides less interesting than the split itself, the division between the two sides of these novels is an artificial feature, something done for fictional effect.

As stated above, I would stop short of describing these novels as being solely about division or 'splitting' as an abstract exercise. That being said, the particular role of the split between experience and style can be seen to be the perpetuation of itself, the evasion of interpretation, rather than the concealment of a solution to the ambiguity of these novels. Neither style nor experience can be labelled as the 'unconscious' hidden side of the novels which determines their meaning. The construction and utilisation of subjectivity in these novels is illuminated by this along with the split between their stylistic and experiential features. The Möbius strip highlights the ambiguity of the subjectivity of these novels, in that they cannot be said to consistently support either a textual simulation of divided subjectivity or a unified self. I would say that the best analogy for the way the protagonists of Rhys, Lessing and Ballard's novels relate to the world is as split-but-not-divided subjects.

The *idea* of wholeness is vital to the way these novels aim at an understanding of the world and the individual's place within it, but is something that remains out of reach, punctured by textual reminders of the opposed tendencies of the two textual elements. Though as a concept it is perhaps too aligned to the concept of a *divided* subject for my purposes, Lacan's theory of the "Mirror Stage" is a useful analogy for the way that a unified subjectivity is seen in all three authors' works as an alternative to the inadequacy of communal language, while still in many ways remaining an ideal state beyond the scope of a literary narrative which is itself linguistic. According to Lacan, each individual's unified sense of themselves has its origin in a hazy moment of identification with their mirror image. Basing his theory on a comparison between the "relative impotence" of human infants and those of other species, Lacan notes that "man's prematurity at birth" causes a "motor impotence and nursling dependence" greater than that of other animals (2006, p. 76). With

this in mind, our identification of this unified, relatively coordinated image as ourselves represents “the formal anticipation of [the] resolution” of our relative impotence (Lacan, 2006, p. 55). The almost desperate identification of our own reflection as an image representing the unity of our innermost selves is an interesting analogy for the way readers perceive a subject, unified or divided, behind the narrative form of the novels of these three authors. It also parallels the way that these novels push toward a resolution of this lack of subjectivity without ever reaching it. Our failure to reach this ideal state of subjectivity is one of the indicators of the unconscious-conscious split acting as an “impediment” to the unity of self (Lacan, 1994, p. 25).

Just as they undermine the possibility of this ideal state of unity, these novels refuse to accept a neatly divided model of the self. Since these novels resist theoretical interpretations that seek to understand and document such division according to social or psychological pathology, theories such as Lacan’s mirror stage are useful only as illustrative analogies rather than templates for interpretation. This is part of the realism of these works, in the sense of the general way they address themselves to reality rather than a particular technique of referential mimesis. The difficulty they represent to anyone seeking a definitive interpretation is a result of their own self-imposed difficulties in searching for an understanding of reality. Because a comprehensive understanding of the world is something which cannot be reached by the individual in reality itself, so must these novels deny an interpretation of their fictional worlds to their readers. The frustrations that style represents to our experiential connection to these works (and vice versa) are as such necessary parts of their attempt to accurately capture the difficulty of understanding reality and the self.

In the case of these novels at least I would argue that this self-imposed difficulty is similar to that which formalist critics like Shklovsky identified as the key characteristic of fiction in general: defamiliarisation (Shklovsky, 2012, p. 12). The everyday use of language was seen by Shklovsky as a tool of familiarisation and acclimatisation. What makes fiction distinctive is the way it uses language in a way contrary to this original purpose, to make the everyday seem unfamiliar (Shklovsky, 2012, pp. 11-13). Fiction as defamiliarisation is reminiscent of the quality which Freud focused on in one of his essays most often used by literary critics, "The Uncanny" (Freud, [1919]). Freud described uncanniness as the eerie intrusion of the unfamiliar into the homely and everyday. Notably, the examples Freud used to illustrate this psychological phenomenon were all literary ones. My contention is that there is an innate similarity between the uneasy feeling of incompleteness psychoanalysis links to the existence of the unconscious and the way that these three authors use a structural dichotomy to delay interpretation, to prevent us becoming too accustomed to their fictional worlds. The role of much of the criticism of the work of Rhys, Lessing and Ballard has been to attempt to counteract this defamiliarisation, to decode the ambiguity of these texts in order to fit them into a unified understanding of reality.

The presence of two voices, one which sets out an experience of reality and one which undermines it, is part of the way that these works ensure that "perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception" (Shklovsky, 2012, p. 22). Shklovsky's formalism does, I feel, resonate well with Lacanian psychoanalysis. On a basic level both Shklovsky and Lacan see language as the primary way humans perceive and comprehend reality, as can be seen in Shklovsky's case in the distinction between familiarising and defamiliarising uses of language referenced above (Lacan, 1970, par. 3-4;

Shlovsky, 2012, pp. 11-13). As with Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, solely relying upon Shklovsky's version of formalism would not give enough weight to the strength of this evasion of interpretation in the way it functions as a split in the literary text. Mikhail Bahktin's critique of Shklovsky's formalism is based precisely on its failure to focus on something similar to the experiential side of the text, namely the way a work of literature almost always "constitutes a distinct (aesthetic) approach to the human condition" (Morson, 2012, p. x). This is something which formalists like Shklovsky discounted due to their desire for a scientific theory of literature but which I agree must be factored into its analysis. Classical formalist theory, as much as a 'diagnostic' use of psychoanalysis, should not be seen as a solution to the ambiguity of these texts.

I have tried, therefore, in my own use of theory to take account of the risk of positing a solution or unified meaning to the ambiguity of the novels of these three authors. Combining psychoanalysis with formalist theory promises the possibility of going "beyond formalism...by becoming more formalistic" in relation to these particular texts, marrying a close textual focus with a suspicion of hermeneutics and 'familiarisation' (Brooks, 1987, p. 337). Rather than 'diagnosing' texts, authors or readers on the basis of psychoanalytic theories, I find psychoanalytic literary criticism most useful when it comes to illuminating textual dynamics: the way their 'literariness' is constructed. My thesis is first of all a critical survey in the way it identifies a failure on the part of critics to preserve this literariness in their response to the work of these three authors. I support this contention by following a critical survey of each author with a close reading of one of their novels in which I attempt to highlight the presence of features that work against the imposition of any firm interpretation.

The first chapter of this thesis begins by looking at the way that the “unusually fissiparous nature” of Rhys criticism can be seen as a split between critics focusing on either the fragmentary nature of Rhys’s style or her protagonists as a mixture of authorial proxy and archetypal symbol of oppressed womanhood (Brown, 2010, p. 568). A critical focus on either the style or experience of these novels does not preclude recognition of the existence of the other. I explore below how such focuses are instead characterised by the excavation and rediscovery of one particular element, legitimised by an argument outlining the inapplicability, obsolescence or superfluity of a focus on the alternate element. The section examining Rhys’s experiential critics looks at a spectrum of writers, from Carole Angier’s reading based upon an exact coincidence between Rhys and her protagonists to Sue Thomas’s reading of Rhys’s works as representative of the experience of a marginal subject of the full force of colonial oppression. The section following this looks at the way that critics who take account of the fragmentation inherent in Rhys’s style generally only do so as a preliminary to the imposition of a theoretical framework. The main examples I give of this are Elizabeth Abel’s reading of Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight* according to Laing’s theories of schizophrenia and Maren Linett’s reading of Rhys’s fiction according to trauma theory. Following these critical explorations is a close reading of Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* which attempts to highlight the careful balance maintained between the style and the experience of the novel, a balance which demonstrates the inadequacy of interpretative models at overcoming the profound ambiguity of the text.

Following this, the chapter on Doris Lessing follows the same basic structure. Perhaps the most significant difference is the fact that a number of critics who base their readings on psychological theories are described as experiential. Critics such as Roberta Rubenstein and



Marion Vlastos partly argue the suitability of their application of theory to Lessing's work by arguing for her conscious use of the philosophical codes of Jungian and Lacanian theory respectively, linking them to Lessing's *weltanschauung*. The nature of Jungian theory in particular is well suited to a focus on the experience of Lessing's protagonists, especially one applied to "The Children of Violence" series of novels as a mystical narrative of individuation. In contrast, similarly to those critics who applied psychological theories to Rhys's work, Jeannette King's Lacanian reading of Lessing's work draws upon the way that a focus on structure and language can support an interpretation of subjective alienation and division. The section examining stylistic approaches to Lessing's work will also use King as an example of how Lacan has been used in a more traditional 'diagnostic' approach to psychoanalytic literary criticism. As with the chapter on Rhys, one particular novel of Lessing's, *The Golden Notebook*, is read in closer detail at the end of the chapter. This novel is read on the basis of the conflict between the linear narrative of the protagonist's recovery of her sense of self and the reflexive and intricate structure of the text.

Criticism of Ballard's fiction is distinguished from that of Rhys and Lessing by the relative lack of interest in the impact personal experience has had on the events and characters present in his novels. Though this may seem surprising considering the relative openness with which Ballard accepted the autobiographical nature of his fiction, I feel that it is the obviousness of an autobiographical approach to Ballard's work which makes it unattractive to literary critics – this fits with the excavatory tendency described above. At the start of the chapter I highlight the material (and in critical terms, neglected) use Ballard makes of his own experience. Following this I look at the way experiential critics of Ballard's work such as Andrzej Gasiorek and Samuel Francis see the worldview of an abstract subject as the

primary determinant of meaning in Ballard's fiction. I describe such approaches to Ballard's fiction as perspectival, due to their prioritisation of his fiction as a unified and sustained perspective on reality. Following this, the diverse critical approaches to Ballard's controversial novel *Crash* serve as a bridge between the surveys of experiential and stylistic approaches to his fiction. I characterise stylistic approaches like that of Paul Youngquist to *Crash* and Jeannette Baxter to Ballard's fiction in general as visual but not perspectival, demonstrating that a link between visual phenomenology and personal experience is not essential to the stylistic-experiential model. I finish the critical survey of Ballard's work by looking at Roger Luckhurst's approach, noting how his understanding of Ballard's fiction as a series of technical and conceptual manoeuvres leads him to dispute the relevance of personal experience to a proper understanding of Ballard's fiction. Finally, I end the chapter with an examination of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, a work I read as an ambiguous combination of personal novel and abstract, textual collage.

Despite the difference between the chapter on Ballard and those focusing on Rhys and Lessing, the experiential-stylistic model remains relevant when looking at criticism of Ballard's work, though it is more nuanced in certain respects. Indeed, this difference provides the possibility of refining the essential aspects of the model, isolated from the affinity of experience or style with particular theoretical perspectives. Across all three chapters the key features of experiential critical approaches are found in their focus on subjectivity as the route toward interpretation. Stylistic approaches, though they may accept subjectivity as a theme of each author's work, see the structure and technique of these novels as the determinant of their meaning, especially in the way that these features undermine the potential a hypothetical central subject has of understanding the world.

Rather than take issue with the textual evidence either of these critical approaches rely upon to justify their limited focus, I will instead attempt to show the insufficiency of either a stylistic or experiential approach in resolving the ambiguous nature of the fiction of Rhys, Lessing and Ballard.

## Chapter 1 – Jean Rhys

In the introduction I argued that the novels of the three authors this thesis focuses on are characterised by a division between two voices or tendencies. One of these can be found in the way the novels are written, in linguistic choices, structures and frames – summarised as the novels' style. The other voice communicates subjective experience through a wider story that can include the author's other fictional and autobiographical works. In this chapter I set out how this division is neglected in critical approaches to the work of Jean Rhys. I argue that such one-sided interpretation is inimical to the nature of Rhys's novels. As mentioned in the introduction, the split between these two voices is related to what Shklovsky described as defamiliarisation, here classified as a delaying or problematisation of interpretation. Functionally, Rhys's novels use the split between experience and style to prolong and secure their ambiguity, something neglected by critics who allow for only one of these elements in their analyses.

As evidence of this, this chapter will read Rhys's critics on the basis of the side of her work that they focus upon, experience or style. Others have noticed the particularly divided nature of Rhys criticism. J Dillon Brown notes that Rhys's work seems to encourage criticism of an "oddly fissiparous nature" (Brown, 2010, p. 568). One of the most "prominent and long abiding" divisions is one that Brown highlights "between critics seeing Rhys either as a modernist (European) or a postcolonial (Caribbean) writer" (2010, p. 568). Though it is probably over-simplistic to present Brown's division as a mere microcosm of a wider divide, it could be said that "modernist" approaches to fiction necessarily focus on aspects of

technique, such as the “episodic and fragmentary...narration” of Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* or the “shifting, multiperspectival narration” of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Brown, 2010, p. 569). Though Brown suggests that the novels’ technique can be read in a way that supports a postcolonial interpretation, the strength of Rhys’s perceptions of power structures and the “insidiously naturalizing effects of the semiotic discourses surrounding her characters”, key features for postcolonial readings of her work, are generally reliant on the experiential content of the heroine’s narrative. For example Urmilla Seshagiri, a postcolonial critic of Rhys mentioned by Brown, argues that Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* refuses “to privilege artistic form”, instead relying on the development of “Anna Morgan’s Creole identity” to communicate its message (Seshagiri, 2006, p. 488).

A division between the stylistic and experiential has a general applicability to the novels of Rhys, Lessing and Ballard in the recurrence of studies which either rely upon a paradigm of subjectivity to analyse the corpus of each author’s work as a whole or reject subjectivity as the primary tool of literary analysis, instead focusing on the novels as technical exercises. The idea of subjectivity remains important to experiential critics of all three authors. In the case of Jean Rhys, however, this subjectivity is most firmly tied to the figure of the author herself – her personality and life-story being a central analytical tool to even those critics who abstain from categorising her fiction as “autobiographical”. Many of the critics who apply psychological frameworks to Rhys’s writing style support their arguments with reference to Rhys herself and her own perceived psychological pathology.

In this chapter I look first of all at the way that critical approaches to Rhys’s work fit the interpretative template described in the introduction – “excavating” a supposedly neglected

meaning for her novels by either categorising her work as a subjective interpretation of reality or technical exercise. Looking at the elements of Rhys's fiction these two critical approaches draw upon leads me to an understanding of Rhys's fiction as split between two opposed meanings. Reading Rhys's novels on the basis of experience leads us to interpret them as the worldview of a single, composite, 'passive but perceptive' protagonist. This reading allows some experiential critics to deploy Rhys's fiction as part of a social critique which circumvents the power bias inherent in language. On the other side of the divide, the style of the novels contradicts both the reliability of the protagonist's perspective, undermined as it is by moments of irony and a split between 'narrated' and 'narrating' I's, and the reading of Rhys's oeuvre as a single composite narrative – undermined as *this* is by the different technical and narrative features present in each novel. Following this wide focus on Rhys's work as a whole and the divergent critical approaches taken toward it I attempt a close analysis of Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* which accepts its ambiguity as an essential part of its nature. The primary recognition this leads to is an understanding of the carefully maintained balance between aesthetic elements that support irreconcilable interpretations of the novel's meaning.

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Much of the criticism of Rhys's work that came after the release of *Wide Sargasso Sea* had as its goal the discovery and normalisation of hidden experiential content. One of these experiential critics, María Reventós, notes that in early reviews of Rhys's work the opposite

was true, in that “her content was reviled as either too shocking or too irrelevant” while “her lean prose style was praised” (1997, p. 97). The reviews of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* that Reventós refers to in support of this, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Nottingham Journal* and *The Boston Transcript*, are similar to early reviews of Rhys’s other novels (1997, pp. 96-97). The initial review of Rhys’s *Quartet* (then known as *Postures*) in the *Manchester Guardian* praised “the distinction of an admirable technique” and states that “*Postures* was worth doing and has been well done”, this is paired however with a distaste for the portrayal of the “sordid” experience of Rhys’s characters (“Books of the Day”, 1928, p. 7). Even Jane Spence Southron’s rare positive 1935 review of *Voyage in the Dark* presents the technical brilliance of the novels as an accepted fact (1935, p. BR7). Southron finishes her review by remarking that “[a]side altogether from its *undeniable* artistic excellence the book displays *unusually* broad sympathy and quite exceptional insight” (1935, p. BR7, emphasis mine). The neglected experience that Rhys presents through her characters is an aberrant feature; the level to which Rhys encourages us to connect with people such as them is *unusual*.

The way Southron’s language presents the protagonist’s experience as a neglected element validating a critical reassessment anticipates the way critics like Reventós were to approach Rhys’s work. Though Reventós recognises that Rhys’s work is a “hybrid product”, she largely directs her study toward the interpretation of the experiential “content” “reviled” by the early critical assessments of Rhys’s work (1997, pp. 97-98). For Reventós, “Rhys was not read because she only represented the experience of women who were social rejects” (1997, p. 98). Thus, even though technical flair is an important element of Rhys’s novels, it is not worthy of critical attention because it needs no further interpretation – early reviewers and readers of Rhys’s work recognised her technical skill, making it a conscious

part of the critical landscape. What needs highlighting, or ‘excavating’, in Rhys’s novels according to Reventós and the other critics I examine in this section is the previously neglected or repressed experience of a marginalised subject. This experience must necessarily be drawn from a wider, more nebulous sense of the novels’ stories than that which supports an assessment of Rhys’s stylistic technique.

The wideness of experiential approaches relative to stylistic ones is manifested in a tendency to read Rhys’s novels as one composite narrative, her main characters as facets of a central protagonist. Carole Angier, Rhys’s most dedicated and accomplished biographer, reads Rhys’s works as a series of attempts at capturing the unique and almost pathological experience of a particular individual at different stages of her life. For Angier at least this individual is for all intents and purposes Rhys herself. Unlike Reventós, Angier argues that Rhys’s style is unworthy of comment largely because Rhys herself had no real control over it and could write “only about herself” (1992, p. 218). For example, Angier feels that the simple fact that Rhys herself “probably couldn’t have said what nihilism is” justifies discounting the possibility that her novel *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* engages with the philosophical concept (1992, pp. 216-218, 239). The particular rejection of a “nihilistic” interpretation of one of Rhys’s novels is a fitting one. Angier’s deployment of autobiographical material is occasionally a specific attempt to counter any impression that Rhys’s works lack a central meaning. As related to *After Leaving Mackenzie* itself, Angier’s counter to a feeling that the novel’s “darkness” leaves it empty of a redemptive meaning is that its purpose, like that of all of Rhys’s novels, is an autobiographical one – Rhys’s attempt to work through her own negative experiences and personality traits (1992, pp. 239-240). For Angier, this autobiographical content is the repressed, ‘unconscious’ element of Rhys’s



fiction – the hidden experience necessary to contextualise and interpret the meaning of Rhys's work.

Elgin Mellown is less convinced of the strictly autobiographical nature of Rhys's fiction. Both Mellown's and Angier's approach to Rhys's work can be seen to hinge on the author's own life experience – it is merely a difference of emphasis which divides them. Angier sees Rhys's work as an extended attempt to get closer to an accurate representation, or "exhibition", of her own experience, her best novels as a result are those which are more earnest about Rhys's own worldview and character (Angier, 1992, pp. 405-406). Mellown sees Rhys's fiction as a process of reframing and reshaping experience to suit the form of fiction, a movement away from the "source" that is her own life. Indeed, for Mellown the maturity of Rhys's novels can be measured by the degree to which she is able to generalise on the basis of her experience, "gradually...[learning] which of her own experiences properly belonged to the character whom she was to sketch over and over in her fiction" (1972, p. 463). "*The character*" is significant for, though not seeing Rhys's work as autobiographical to the same degree as Angier, Mellown displays the same attitude to them as a composite story. Mellown reads Rhys four pre-war novels as "one, fairly sequential, story" in which the "four individuals are manifestations of the same psychological type" (1972, p. 460). Mellown remarks that "Rhys remains a mysterious figure", before presenting autobiographical evidence as a preliminary to the presentation of his theory. This perceived neglect of Rhys's own experience in previous critical assessments of her work makes it valuable to Mellown as an interpretive tool for his own analysis, its concealment again making it more interesting than the 'surface' technique of the texts.

Mellown sees the technical differences between the novels as a natural and unremarkable aspect of Rhys's development as a writer, rather than something that might have connotations for the proper interpretation of the novels. Technique is for Mellown merely something developed in the course of "Rhys's movement away from autobiography toward an ever more complete imaginative rendition of the single character" (1972, p. 463). For example, rather than seeing the third-person narration of *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* as a stylistic choice made by Rhys, Mellown argues that it is a side effect of the fact that "Rhys only gradually learned her technique" (1972, p. 470). This leads him to the judgement that "[Rhys's] first two novels are flawed by her failure to control the point of view", demonstrating an assumption that the only role of the technique Rhys employs in her novels is to act as a transparent vehicle for the communication of experience (Mellown, 1972, p. 470). This aspect of Mellown's argument is central to the readings of many experiential critics of Rhys. For experiential approaches, the unity and centrality of the protagonists is a necessary validation of the truth of the experience portrayed. Because of this, the first person perspective Rhys was to adopt in her three later novels is seen as the most natural and unaffected way of strengthening the protagonist's status as the perceptual centre of the novels.

This is also the case for those critics who see the experiential content of her work as relevant to a wider category of oppressed subjects, marginalised due to gender, social standing or colonial origin. Sue Thomas focuses on how Rhys "engages with [the] discourses of empire, gender, sex, race, class and desire that shaped her sense of the world" (1999, p. 2). Thomas's primary concern is to examine the ways that Rhys forms her own identity as a Dominican in opposition to the way that this formation is endangered by latent masculinist,

imperialistic determinations of the nature of the female Creole subject. In order to achieve this, Thomas uses the experiential content of Rhys's work to circumvent the distortions imparted to the discourse of oppressed subjects by symbolic structure. For example, Thomas views *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a response to "Brontë's bestialization" of the Creole Bertha Mason, while she argues that *Voyage in the Dark* enacts a corresponding "bestialization [of] English" society in its presentation of "class, gender, and ethnic prejudice against the white Creole protagonist" (1999, p. 18). The strength of such readings depends on the perspective of a protagonist as a focal point for the experience of impersonal societal forces.

I would argue that the degree to which these critics read Rhys's work as autobiographical is less important than the particular way they support their reading of her work – just as in the last chapter it shall be seen that the lack of critical approaches to Ballard's work that rely on an autobiographical link does not preclude either the existence or the relevance of experiential critical approaches to his novels. Staying with the criticism of Rhys's work, Mellow, as I mention above, does argue that the key factor of her fictional development is a movement away from the autobiographical experience which Angier so strongly contends that Rhys *cannot* escape from. Despite this, both of their readings are dependent on an interpretation of the novels as a set of events experienced and communicated by a unified central individual. In the same vein, though she rejects the supposition that the failings of Rhys's protagonist should be read "as a sign of Rhys's own", Thomas's reading is as equally aligned toward the interpretation of the world-view of a single figure (1999, p. 3). Indeed, it could be said that the degree to which each critic contends that this central figure *is* Rhys is less interesting in comparison to the elements of Rhys's fiction they use to support the act of

interpretation. I believe that this focus on the *fictional* deployments of experience and style, along with the critical interpretations that reply upon them, is one which validates both the similarity drawn between these three authors and the comparison highlighted between experiential and stylistic critical strategies.

More important than a critic's particular interpretation of a novel is a process that precedes it – the allotment of significance to particular aspects of Rhys's fiction. The elements of Rhys's work that Thomas sees as important can be seen in her analysis of the distressing autobiographical narrative of sexual abuse found in the unpublished journal written by Rhys known as the "Black Notebook" (1999, pp. 27-47). The way that Thomas welcomes a removal of the distractions of style, as well as a remark from Rhys describing the release of being able to write without the "torture" of novelistic form, is part of her deployment of this narrative in the valorisation of the experiential content of Rhys's published work (1999, p. 27). Thomas and the other critics we have looked at so far are as such "wagering on the perceived immediacy of experience as the evidence for subaltern specificity and counterhegemonic action" (Ireland, 2002, p. 87). For Thomas, the perceptual and sensory world constructed by the novels is both more *immediate* and more relevant in Rhys's novels than the particular language and structure that it is framed within. This is a conviction that can be seen in the work of other experiential critics, especially in their complaint that alternative approaches miss the importance of the protagonist's experience in their readings of the novels.

Judith Kegan Gardiner writes that "The alienation of [Rhys's] characters has alienated some of her critics who wish to exclude themselves from the experiences about which she

writes, although they applaud her artistic skill, particularly her purity of style" (1983, p. 233). For Gardiner, this alienation is central to the experience Rhys is seeking to transmit through her novels, it is the

specific historical result of social polarizations about sex, class, and morality. Her heroes are women alienated from others and themselves because they are female, poor, and sexually active. They are also misdefined by a language and literary heritage that belong primarily to propertied men (1983, p. 233)

Though Rhys's protagonists may be partly shaped by the latent prejudices that exist within language, for Gardiner the continuing presence of those prejudices within "language and literary heritage" means that we cannot truly understand them by analysing language itself or the styling of it for fictional purposes. In a later monograph on Rhys, Christina Stead and Doris Lessing, Gardiner argues that understanding both Rhys and her protagonists is something better accomplished through intersubjective empathy – circumventing the distortion of linguistic and social codes to try and connect with the heroine/author as source of experience (Gardiner, 1989, p. 2).

Nancy Harrison is even more emphatic when it comes to the importance of the link between reader, author and protagonist. In relation to her own particular experience of reading Rhys, Harrison remarks that that she began with a "basic assumption" that "women's novels in [the 20th] century seemed to be more autobiographical than men's novels" (1988, p. xi). The obvious empirical objections to such an approach do not really

apply, since the “meeting between book and reader is one of the most private, most intimate of acts”. Logic is therefore unimportant in comparison with the sense of another person perceived almost mystically by the reader in the course of the reading experience (Harrison, 1988, p. 2). Underlying Harrison’s study is her feeling that the best way of interpreting Rhys’s work is as an attempt by a woman to connect with other women on the basis of a set of personal events, generalised in a way that makes them analogous of women’s experience as a whole. Rhys’s novels are placed within a category of “[l]iterature designed primarily for an audience of women readers”, in which the “participation” of even the most perceptive, empathetic male reader “may be self-limiting” (Harrison, 1988, p. 11, 6).

There are two exceptions that one can take to such an attitude. The first is the general one which Ireland posits as a criticism of all interpretative uses of experience, that they risk descending into a sort of naive biologism that, in attempting to “ground group specificity by appealing to immediacy”, ends up in positing a sort of exceptionalism for the experience of a particular group (2002, p. 96). The second exception to take against an approach like Harrison’s is one that is more relevant to the argument presented here. Molly Hite remarks in relation to approaches to Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* that “Essentializing appeals to ‘female experience’ run into trouble because they act as if such experience transcended the shaping and informing of culture and language” (1988a, p. 482). As I explore in the next section, the style and language of Rhys’s novels is vital to the message she seeks to impart, despite and perhaps *because* of the way it contradicts a sense of the protagonist as the unified perceptual centre of the novels.

It must also be allowed that the experiential approaches we have examined thus far do have a valuable, if partial, insight into the nature of Rhys's novels, a nature which they have some grounds to present as a single, composite story. The story both Angier's approach and that of Harrison, Thomas and Gardiner draw from Rhys's novels is one of a passive and marginalised woman, drawn into relationships with men who mistreat her. What supports such a reading of Rhys's novels is to be found in their repetition of and fixation upon a particular series of events, as well as their base similarity in terms of the portrayal of the central figure. The protagonists of Rhys's novels share a marginal perspective, imparted by their poverty, their 'immorality' (according to the standards of the time) and a background which is, if not always specifically colonial, not quite English enough.

Their marginal perspective enables Rhys's heroines to be particularly perceptive of the power relationships that dominate the metropolitan societies that they find themselves within, despite their own relative lack of power. Supporting this passive but perceptive experiential reading of Rhys's protagonists is the fact that the material existences of the heroines of the four pre-war novels are dominated by the power others have over them through wealth and social standards. In *Quartet* Marya is persuaded to accept assistance from the Heidlers due to her own poverty and the assertiveness gifted to the couple by their wealth. In the same way the narratives of both *Voyage in the Dark* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* are dominated by money and the way it is used to control and restrict others. Importantly, there is a strong link between the passivity displayed by Rhys's protagonists and money. The giving of money in *Voyage in the Dark* is strongly linked with the way the protagonist Anna's lover Walter customarily dismisses her soon after they sleep together. Seeing Walter put money into her bag on one occasion and attempting to be subtle about it,

Anna at first thinks of challenging his commodifying act, but instead responds with the superlatively passive phrase “All right, if you like – anything you like, any way you like” (Rhys, 2000b, pp. 33-34).

The refusing of money by the protagonists is correspondingly viewed by those who hold the purse strings as irrational and dangerous. When Julia, protagonist of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, confronts the Mackenzie of the novel's title in a restaurant, she only really shakes him when she states that she means to refuse the larger lump sum that he has sent through his lawyer as a preliminary to stopping the regular payments he has been sending her after breaking things off with her (Rhys, 2000a, p. 26). Similarly, when Anna becomes pregnant and has to turn to Walter (now her former lover) for financial help his cousin Vincent, sent by Walter, is both unsurprised about her situation and surprisingly quick to offer the necessary sum. Vincent only remonstrates with Anna about her previous decision to break off contact with him and his cousin previously, reading that breach as an irrational refusal of the financial help Walter was offering his former lover.

It is this helplessness in the face of social machinery which makes the identification of the heroine as the perceptual centre of the novels so vital to experiential readings of Rhys's work. For our empathetic identification with the central character to have a deeper meaning, moral judgements made on the basis of the novels' events must be traced back to the heroine as ultimate source of experience. The protagonist is the very reason we as readers are able to perceive injustice since we see through her eyes. Thomas relies on the characterisation of the heroine as *viewer* literally when she moves from the statement that “Anna's glimpse of herself and Walter in his bedroom mirror on the night their relationship is



consummated graphically suggests the implications for her identity of her becoming an amateur [prostitute]”, to “Rhys is confirming the ‘love of finery’ explanation for female promiscuity, but implying that social and class attitudes to clothes rather than simply decadent consumerism lead impoverished women to invest so much in their appearance” (1999, pp. 104-105). In order to read *Voyage in the Dark* as a record of subversive feminine experience Thomas characterises Anna as a viewer rather than a speaker or agent, as someone who “looks at herself in the mirror of Walter’s bedroom” or “sees him surreptitiously putting more money into her handbag” (Thomas, 1999, p. 105). Thomas’s interpretation of the novels therefore relies directly on what Anna sees. This seeing becomes an initial delineation of the structure of oppression, awaiting the interpretation of the critic who knows the meaning of such images.

This identification of the heroine as centre of the sensory world constructed by Rhys’s prose is itself *centralising*. In the exploration undertaken above of the perspective of “experiential” critics, it can be seen that each, as well as engaging with the novels themselves, engages with Rhys as a person even if they do not go as far as to define her novels as essentially autobiographical. At one end of the spectrum this can be seen in Angier’s statement that Rhys could write “only about herself”, at the other in Thomas’s deployment of the unaffected, ‘unpolished’ narrative of the Black Notebook, in which Rhys herself is the protagonist, in the analysis of the rest of Rhys’s fiction (1992, p. 218). As centre of the world of Rhys’s novels, the interpretation of her protagonist on the basis of a particular set of experiences expands to include author, protagonist and, by extension, the phenomenological world the reader enters through their mediation. Harrison perhaps sums it up best in her whole-hearted support for a tendency to “identify the constitution of the

writer, herself as subject, with the process and production of her work” (1988, p. 67).

Despite being one-sided, partial interpretations, experiential readings provide several useful insights in their analysis of Rhys’s fiction. Firstly, they work against those critics who reject Rhys’s work due to its ‘otherness’ and they attempt to normalise the experience they portray in the process. Secondly, many of them deploy Rhys’s work polemically to undermine the universalism of discourses of power and prejudice. Finally, they strengthen the force of this argument by reading the protagonist as a unified focal point for the portrayal and seemingly impartial criticism of oppressive social mechanisms. Conceding these three accomplishments does not, however, change the force of the central argument of this thesis – that their wholehearted espousal can blind a reader to another side of Rhys’s fiction. This is the side that the next section will explore in its analysis of those critics who focus on what I have defined as the inverse side of Rhys’s fiction: their shape and structure, abstracted from the experience of one particular individual. Indeed, one of the clearest features of the style of Rhys’s work – that the central figure is divided at the deepest level of her ‘self’ – can be seen to contradict both the third insight of experiential criticism stated above and the strength it provides to the second.

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I feel that the one-sidedness of experiential readings is demonstrated most clearly in the viability of the conflicting perspective provided by stylistic approaches. Seeing Rhys’s work through the prism of her technique demonstrates various weaknesses in experiential

readings, similar to Molly Hite's criticism of the reliance on feminine experience in wider literary critical practice. I agree with Hite above all in the sense that no experience can avoid "the shaping and informing of culture and language", especially when it is invariably transmitted through the very language it purportedly rejects. On one level, what we have termed above the experiential story, the narratives of Rhys's novels do herald the accuracy and immediacy of their centred perspectives. It is the way that these narratives are shaped, the split between what Le Gallez describes as "the 'narrating I' and the 'narrated I'", that undermines the impression of unity that the story seeks to impart (1990, p. 83).

The problematic unity of Rhys's protagonists is akin to the unity claimed by the ego in Lacanian psychoanalysis. This claim is built on the sleight of hand of the mirror stage, in which the feeling of inadequacy the child feels faced by his complete and coordinated reflection is turned into a feeling of anticipation of "the maturation of his power" (Lacan, 2006, p. 76). This moment is later interpreted as the *perception* of an extant unified self-image rather than the *construction* of one. In the same way, the critics examined above present the unity of the central protagonist as an essential, unsurprising feature of the novels' world. Our adoption of a mirror image as the image of our 'self' is one of the clearest examples of an immediate experience, one that circumvents the distortions imposed by language. This is because it happens, or later appears to have happened, at a prelinguistic time in the subject's development. In an experiential reading of Rhys's work, all the protagonist has at times to oppose the discourses and structures of power is an indistinct and shifting sense of herself. A first-person mode becomes the most 'natural' way for Rhys to write as it is both immediate and seemingly unaffected by external linguistic distortion. A focus on Rhys's style in both her third-person and first-person novels contradicts this,

suggesting that the external perspective in the former is not merely incidental, while the 'personal' perspective of the latter is not as unified as it appears.

The fact the narrator of Rhys's first two, third-person, novels remains so focused on her protagonist does not necessarily indicate an absolute union between narrator and protagonist. I would contend that the union between perspective and protagonist is an ideal state similar to the complete image the split subject perceives in the mirror in Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. For example, the narrative voice knows things that Rhys's protagonist desires to know but cannot. This is not the same as an omniscient narrator, because the narrative voice is not interested in the lack of knowledge of any other character — it is only interested in what Marya or Julia does not know. In *Quartet* the initial perceptive, impersonal assessment of Lois given when she and Marya first meet is immediately undermined by a qualifier phrased directly from Marya's perspective, she is "perhaps, thought Marya, just thoroughly enjoying her pilaff" (Rhys, 1973, p. 12). A split between narrator and protagonist, that which thinks and that which exists, is shown in this division between an impersonal voice that provides abstract information about other characters and a personal one linked to the immediate, experienced environment.

The critic who best understands the significance of this split in relation to Rhys's third person novels is probably Paula Le Gallez. Le Gallez makes clear her stylistic intentions at the start of her monograph on Rhys, *The Rhys Woman*. By stating that she means "to examine the language [of Rhys's novels] closely" before taking any "feminist, psychological or even autobiographical" approach to her fiction, Le Gallez sets her perspective in opposition to those who read Rhys's fiction as a composite of life, story and experience (1990, p. 8).

Perhaps paradoxically, the strength of Le Gallez's reading of Rhys's protagonist's as split comes partially from her contention that the third-person narrative voice of *After Leaving, Mackenzie* and *Quartet* is for all intents and purposes Marya herself. Le Gallez states that "there is sufficient textual evidence to make a total identification of the narrative stance with that of Marya's perspective" (1990, p. 22).

This nonchalance, in contrast to the criticisms of Mellown of *Quartet*'s narrative style for example, can be seen to result from Le Gallez's acceptance that the label 'Marya' can refer to a divided entity. Noting for example the "sustainment of...prolepsis" at a particular point when Marya is engaged in a disagreeable conversation with Heidler, Le Gallez remarks that "[o]n the one hand this points to an even deeper withdrawal from reality, given that the subject of her reverie is now created out of the fabric of her own imagination" (1990, p. 52). "On the other hand, however" the particular content of the daydream abstracted from the diegetic significance of the *fact* of her daydreaming "does show Marya's awareness of the position of women in society, and it is thus concerned with a more general reality" (Le Gallez, 1990, p. 52). The things that Marya says, thinks and does can have a dual meaning – one imparted by the narrating, the other by the narrated 'I'.

It can be said that Le Gallez falls into the typical interpretative trap described at the beginning of this chapter in the way that she argues that her analysis demonstrates "the unconscious feminism of a consciously non-feminist writer" (1990, p. 8). This demonstrates the set pattern of designating the focus of study as repressed, disagreeing not with the conclusion of critics such as Thomas and Harrison but with the overly experience-focused methods that they employed. To an extent, Le Gallez's recognition of the split protagonists

of Rhys's fiction is undermined through this recourse to theoretical interpretation. Le Gallez recognises the conflict between the nature of Rhys's protagonists as split and the role they play as the unified perceptual centre in experiential readings. She sees this, however, as an argument against experiential readings of Rhys's novels, rather than a complication of the act of interpretation itself. This can be seen in the way that Le Gallez notes the split in Rhys's narrative voice, but relates it to an interpretation of Rhys's writing as displaying an "unconscious" and therefore repressed feminism. Though each of the three style-focused critics this section studies recognises the ambiguity of Rhys's work to a degree, I would argue that they only do this insofar as they can *interpret* it through the imposition of a particular theory.

Perhaps because of the greater need for theoretical underpinning, this is even more the case for those critics who focus their attention on the division in the narrative voice of Rhys's first-person novels. Elizabeth Abel concentrates on *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Moring, Midnight*, finding in her analysis that "[R.D.] Laing's account of the dynamics of schizophrenia provides a helpful framework for considering certain enigmatic features of Rhys's fiction" (Abel, 1979, p. 157). Abel's approach differs noticeably from experience-based approaches in the way that it analyses "certain enigmatic features" rather than considering Rhys's entire output as a composite narrative for interpretation. That said, taking Abel's argument as a whole we can see the same argument of an interpretational deficit, of something missed in Rhys's work, as we saw in the approach of experience-focused critics like Reventós. Abel remarks that "[t]he commentary on Rhys written by women has tended to be descriptive and biographical rather than analytical" and that explaining the "perversely self-destructive reactions of Rhys's heroines" requires us to "relinquish our expectation of a

surface realism and adopt a psychological framework" (1979, p. 155n2, 156). The conflict which Abel perceives in the actions of Rhys's protagonists is the cue for interpretation, the reason for moving past what seems to be on the surface to the hidden meanings locked within the novel's language and structure.

Abel's perception of this conflict in the inner lives of Rhys's protagonists is combined with a lack of interest in the wider plots of Rhys's novels. Reading the novels on a stylistic basis leads Abel to contend that the rich presentation of Anna's past makes the novel's central "tale of unrequited love" staged in a grey and unappealing England seem "almost intentionally banal" (1979, p. 158). It could be argued that this lack of interest in the main plot of the novel is a direct result of the lack of identification with the main character as empathetic centre of the novels. Rather than emphasising that Anna possesses a unity of self, built upon on a firm sense of her childhood, Abel highlights the way her inability to reconcile her past with her current experience of England leads to the dissolution of the self she has founded on it. This does not mean that Abel does not connect with Rhys's protagonists, but that her one-sided reading of them as schizophrenic undermines the meaning the protagonist's experience gives to the external events of the novel.

In Abel's reading of the novel the way Anna expresses herself in her narrative encourages the reader to disregard the events of the wider story, as "the real self" represented by Anna's happy childhood "retreats within the mechanical being she becomes in response to her daily life" (1979, p. 158). Abel notes the "curiously flat and dry" tone of the first-person narrative, remarking that "[w]hen Anna remembers the past, however, the style changes in ways that suggest the qualities of her stifled inner life" (1979, p. 159). This gradual

staunching of inner imagination, when combined with an experience of the external world as “stifled”, fits for Abel with the way the schizophrenic experiences the physical world as “flat and empty, a two-dimensional stage setting through which the body wanders” (1979, p. 159). Despite the fact that Harrison quotes Abel in support of her experiential reading of Rhys, this contrasts strongly with Harrison’s description of the “marked response to the display of the world” communicated by the “emphatic subjectivity of the first-person narration in *Voyage in the Dark*” (1988, p. 65). This is because each critic is reading only one side of an innate duality displayed in Rhys’s fiction. We can say that the style of *Voyage* makes the romantic plot seem “banal”. Equally valid, however, is the judgement that the kindness Walter shows Anna and her oft stated fondness for him contradict a purely stylistic judgement of the value of their relationship.

Abel’s approach to Rhys’s work demonstrates a comprehension of the importance of language in forming and constructing the reality of the subject. Because of this, Abel’s analysis recognises the division in the narrative voice of Rhys’s first person novels, evinced in *Voyage in the Dark* in the way the “vivid” past cannot be reconciled with the “flat and empty” present. More generally we can see in *Voyage in the Dark* the same dual meaning related to Anna’s actions and thoughts as that Le Gallez identifies in *Quartet*, despite the first person form of the later novel. One example of this is to be found at the very beginning of the novel, when Anna is reading Zola’s *Nana* in a particularly disinterested way. Her roommate Maudie remarks that she knows that it’s “a dirty book”, a book “about a tart”. Sue Thomas and Teresa O’Connor note the similarity between the profession of Zola’s protagonist and the fate awaiting Anna herself (Thomas, 1999, pp. 104-105; O’Connor, 1986, p. 136). O’Connor implies that Anna is reading Zola’s book only half-heartedly because she



foresees the fate awaiting her, remarking that “[i]t is rather difficult to believe that what frightens Anna is only the look of the words” (1986, p. 136).

This judgement is characteristic of the experiential reading of Rhys’s protagonist as someone “trying *not* to think” about such parallels, living instead in the immediate present (Angier, 1992, p. 300, emphasis in original). This is paradoxical, because Anna, as a figure who by the terms of any experiential analysis can only exist in the precise moment of narration (subject to her past though unable to analyse its hold upon her), can have no idea of how similar to Nana she will be at the novel’s end. The recognition of narrative and subjective dissonance by Le Gallez means that she is able to recognise the possibility that the ‘narrating’ Anna, as distinct from the ‘narrated’ Anna, can attempt to “deflect attention away from the content of [Zola’s] book” as a “clever manoeuvre”, leaving “the reader to determine any interpretation of its visual meaning” (1990, p. 83). The protagonist is both the passive and innocent victim whose downfall we foresee and someone who hides a greater deal of foreknowledge than we possess as a reader, controlling the exposition of the story and its effect on the reader. The astute perception of power structures on the part of the narrative voice of Rhys’s novels implies a level of control over the discourse incompatible with the passivity of the protagonist as a character. This undermines the experiential ‘passive but perceptive’ reading of Rhys’s protagonists by puncturing the unity and immediacy of the narrative.

Equally, however, we could say that this sort of “analytical” focus on particular elements of the style combined with the refusal to accept the protagonist as a guarantor for the ‘experience’ of the story can lead to a neglect of the wider scope of the plot. In Abel’s case

we have seen how it led her to neglect the very real hurt done to Anna by the loss of a man she genuinely cared for, seeing her relationship with Walter as merely something that happens on the margins of Anna's growing psychological instability. Equally, Le Gallez's focus on "*certain* textual structures" as opposed to the novels as an individual testament can "work towards obliterating [the protagonist's] image as living human being" (Le Gallez, 1992, p. 83, emphasis mine). A closer, more 'analytical' focus can mean that "the reader's[...]apprehension of Anna's identity" is always limited (Le Gallez, 1992, p. 83). I would argue that Abel and, though perhaps to a lesser extent, Le Gallez both neglect the wider stories of Rhys's novels due to this lack of empathetic identification with their protagonists, something which can also be seen in the analyses of other style-based critics.

While for Elizabeth Abel Rhys's fragmentary style suits R D Laing's theory of schizophrenia, other critics have used the same evidence to support different psychological interpretations. Maren Linett reads the fragmentary nature and "polyvocal, nonlinear narration" of Rhys's novels in the context of trauma theory. Linett, like Angier, sees Rhys's novels as essentially autobiographical, validating a tentative separation of this tendency from the experiential-stylistic split. The traumatic event that Linett sees as central to the tone of the novels is one that happened in Rhys's own childhood (2005, pp. 445-446). Linett, however, rather than relying primarily on the similarity of the plot of the novels to events of Rhys's own life (though she does do this to a limited extent), largely relies on the application of an external psychological framework to the way in which Rhys tells her stories. Linett states for example that the status of Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* as a survivor of trauma is suggested in the way she half tells and half remembers aspects of her past (2005, pp. 447-448). This uncertainty over the content of the memories is matched by that over their temporal status: "The

fragmentation of Anna Morgan's memory is necessarily entwined with a sense of her past as discontinuous, an inability to order her memories that raises the spectre of timelessness" (Linett, 2005, p. 448).

In the same way as Abel, it is Linett's interpretation according to a univocal external theory that undermines her perception of the division which inspired it. By both perceiving trauma and providing an apparent cause, Linett paradoxically reduces the validity of such a perception. This is because of the status of trauma as "a knowledge so partial that it borders on denial, a revelation so incomplete that it obscures" (Linett, 2006 p. 438). Because Linett is not diagnosing an actual, living subject but rather the way Rhys's style of writing suggests a hypothetical sufferer, the only justification she has for such an approach is the precise unknowability of the cause behind the fragmentation of Rhys's language. By this I mean that she cannot rely upon the subject's lack of knowledge of the cause because there is no subject and no objectively verifiable cause. In her suggestion that the reason for this fragmentation was because "Rhys herself was traumatized" by a particular event in her childhood, Linett makes it more difficult to argue that the novels themselves display a traumatic style (Linett, p. 439). The nature of trauma makes defamiliarisation even more important in the proper transmission of an impression of it. The more the reason behind the fragmentation of the narrative becomes believable for a reader, the less it has that essential quality of blockage and denial required to communicate the nature of trauma to someone who has never experienced it. It is Linett's singular focus on the language of Rhys's work abstracted from the subjective dimension, the way that a reader's connection with the protagonist can fill the gaps of the novels' fragmented style, which leads to this impasse. The experiential critics examined above miss the significance of the fragmentation of discourse

for the nature of Rhys's novels, its consequences for an interpretation that relies upon a unified sense of self. Equally however, the stylistic critics miss the importance of the empathetic link between the protagonist and reader, their shared experience of the world of the novels, in the transmission of the stories Rhys seeks to tell.

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The reading of Rhys's novels presented in this chapter seeks to avoid neglecting either experience or style. Below I aim to present *Good Morning, Midnight* as an example of the duality of Rhys's fiction. At times the division of Rhys's fiction manifests itself in this novel openly through two differing narrating voices. Whereas in Rhys's other fiction we see the split between a narrating I and narrated I that Le Gallez describes, to a certain extent *Good Morning, Midnight* shows a split between *two* narrating Is. At first it may seem that this is a division between a 'positive' self-affirming experiential voice and a 'negative' repudiative voice. I would argue however that the second voice is 'negative' only insofar as it is a value neutral inversion of the self-constructing, experiential discourse. To valorise one of Sasha's discourses as primary or more affirmative than the other is somewhat misleading. For example, at a moment when Sasha is trying to cheer herself up with the thought of a day spent shopping, "Some money to spend and nothing to worry about", the negative voice chips in saying "Don't get excited. You know what happens when you get excited and exalted, don't you?...Yes...And then, you know how you collapse like a pricked balloon don't you?...Yes" (*GMM*, p. 14). This voice could be read in a mocking, torturing way. It could also

be seen to be a protective force however, a way of shielding Sasha from further emotional pain and chastisement. This split self exists in an uneasy balance throughout the novel before affecting the end of the novel in a way that cements the ambiguity of the work as a whole.

As with readings of Rhys's other novels, I would argue that the main issue with criticism of this novel is a failure to take account of this ambiguity. The critics studied above read this novel according to the same terms as the rest of Rhys's work. For example, Angier asserts that the brilliance of this novel is in presenting Rhys's own flaws honestly – it is her “masterpiece of self-knowledge”, her most comprehensive “exhibition of herself” (Angier, 1992, pp. 405-406). This sense of the novel as an “exhibition” is based upon a designation of one voice of the novel, the positive experience-based one, as the primary determinant of meaning through its status as the ‘true’ voice of the protagonist. In contrast, Abel's reading of the novel according to Laing's theory of schizophrenia necessarily valorises the negative voice as evidence of Sasha's divided self. Where Angier sees Sasha's story as an exercise in ‘exhibition’, an externalising process, Abel sees it as an internalising one. Rather than *exhibiting* herself to a greater degree “Rhys *probes* beyond the experience of fragmentation she suggests” in the earlier *Voyage in the Dark* (Abel, 1979, p. 161, emphasis mine). In the same way, Sasha's narration and way of engaging with the world “mirrors the development Laing portrays from the schizophrenic's initial sense of a divided self to the creation of a network of intra-psychic relationships that replace relationships with the external world” (Abel, 1979, p. 161). The almost precisely opposite language each critic employs in analysing the novel is testament to their focus on a single side of the ambiguous whole.

As evidence of the novel's ambiguity, reading particular events in the novel according to either their style or their reference to the wider narrative can support two equally valid and yet contradictory interpretations of the novel's meaning. Sasha's passivity and empathy could support a reading of the novel as a distillation of feminine or personal experience. When Sasha is crying in a café near the novel's beginning, a woman on another table seems to empathise with her, remarking that she often feels like crying herself. This sentiment however is immediately undermined with her next remark, "that's not to say that I let everyone see it" (*GMM*, p. 10). A connection with another person is never a simple affair in Rhys's fiction. As we have touched upon above, such relationships are always affected by social forces even as they seek to evade and subvert them. *Wide Sargasso Sea* has a similar ambiguous empathy in Antoinette's relationship with Tia, her Afro-Caribbean childhood friend. Their friendship eventually breaks down due to the disdain of the colony's former slaves for Antoinette's poor and previously slave-owning family. This communal hatred climaxes in the attack on Antoinette's family home in which her brother dies. As part of a furious mob of former slaves, Tia throws a stone at Antoinette which draws blood. Rhys refuses to allow this scene to be read simply however. Antoinette negates the violent content of the event by stating "I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet running down my face", before she pushes the scene toward a moment of staged reflection, "blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass" (Rhys, 1968, p. 38).

Though their relationship is as ambiguous as those Sasha builds with others in *Good Morning, Midnight*, the division between the two readings of the event is clearer. The 'real' event is a violent one, a latent, stylistic sense present in the way the stone is described as

“jagged” and Tia’s face “crumple[s]” as she starts to cry (Rhys, 1968, p. 38, emphasis mine). At the same time Antoinette’s experience of the scene is perversely redemptive, actually supporting her desire to “live with Tia” and to “be like her” (Rhys, 1968, p. 38). This split is also present in the portrayal of the act of suicide and arson that ends both *Jane Eyre* and, indirectly, *Sargasso*. At the end of a dream she has of setting fire to the English house in which she has been imprisoned, Antoinette sees Tia and Coulibri, her old home, over the edge of the roof, reading the act of jumping to her death as a liberation (Rhys, 1968, p. 155). The split here is then between the fact that Antoinette presents her death “as a positive act of establishing her own sense of self, of going forward to meet an identity which she has been deprived of in the unnatural environment imposed on her” and the fact that “[o]ur own response is ambivalent” due to the “violence of her end” (Le Gallez, 1990, p. 170). The split is a relatively clear one, created by the discord between the level of the story under Antoinette’s control and the way Rhys suggests violence and tragedy through “narrative jolt[s]” and style (Le Gallez, 1990, p. 175).

In contrast I would argue that the split between the two voices of *Good Morning, Midnight* is internalised within Sasha to a greater degree, making the ambiguity of the work more complex as a result. While the split between experience and language as it relates to particular events is relatively clear the “meaning” each side represents is less so, further problematising any simple interpretation of the novel. The confusion of internal and external negativity in this novel highlights the interdependence of the conscious and unconscious minds, the twist in the strip that links them. For example, the external chastising yet perversely kind remark of the woman in the café is similar to the remarks often made by the internal ‘negative’ voice in Sasha’s own head.

What makes the experiential ideal of unity important despite this split is the fact that Sasha herself attempts to ignore her divided nature and reject the other side of her psyche. This means that our ability to connect with the novel as a subjective perspective on reality is dependent upon our partial acceptance of this conceit. This desire for wholeness is clear when Sasha is talking about the divergent voice directly, remarking that “The other - how do I know who the other is? She isn’t me” (*GMM*, p. 154). Equally, the other side of the novels, the play of language and structure, resists simply being assimilated into the perspective of a central subject. The minimalism of Rhys’s style is central in maintaining the balance between these two elements. Sasha’s actions are related simply, in brief but evocative sentences, giving the barest minimum of information. “I take some more luminal, put the light out and sleep at once” moves into “I am in the passage of a tube station in London”, with no connecting clause to indicate the second sentence marks the start of a dream (*GMM*, p. 12). The style of the novel makes the nature of the reality Sasha experiences, including the chronology and significance of events, subject to a degree of uncertainty.

The irony critics such as Le Gallez identify in Rhys’s work reaches something of a high point in this novel. Sasha’s nostalgia for the past, her feeling that things once were or could be better, is consistently punctured by the negative voice. Perhaps the most striking example is a scene contained within a reminiscence of time spent working in a dress shop in which Sasha is confronted by an almost allegorical manifestation of the rich English gentleman - the shop’s owner “Mr Blank”. Directing her to take something to the “kise”, Blank mocks Sasha mercilessly when she returns after helplessly wandering the building looking for it (*GMM*, pp. 22-24). It transpires that Blank meant to say “caisse” but murdered the pronunciation. The name of the character is partially an attempt to demonstrate how



common such men and such situations are, disguised as an attempt at discretion on Sasha's part. But the fact that Blank's humiliation of Sasha is a linguistic one suggests that something deeper is happening in this scene. It doesn't matter if Blank gets the French word wrong; language itself, in the form of the referential protocol that sends Sasha looking for something non-existent and leaves her unable to correct him, gifts him his position of unaccountable power. Initially Sasha seems to respond to this attack with an unconquerable sense of justice:

You, who represent Society[...]have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word[...]Let's say that you have this mystical right to cut my legs off. But the right to ridicule me afterwards because I am a cripple - no, that I think you haven't got (*GMM*, pp. 25-26)

Sasha perceives that Blank's power lies in words, those that "harass" and "ridicule", and his control of them is the clearest evidence of his economic and social standing. Yet it seems that Sasha, despite the damage it has done her, can remain impervious enough to respond. That is, until we get to the twist following her 'outburst' against Blank: "Did I say all this? Of course I didn't. I didn't even think it" (*GMM*, p. 26). This final touch completely changes the meaning of the previous utterance and, in reminding us that it is an artificial reminiscence, the entire scene (Le Gallez, 1990, pp. 121-122). It transforms Sasha's tirade from a

courageous act, like Julia's striking of Mackenzie, into a symbol, a stylised confrontation that is almost arbitrary in specific content. In terms of Sasha's status as an experiencing subject, there is no discrepancy between the events of this scene and the meaning Sasha imparts to them as an example of the unfairness of economic and social relationships. The way it is narrated, however, undermines the trust a reader places in Sasha as protagonist, firstly in the way that she leads us to believe she said something that she did not, secondly in the way that she breaks the unity of the reminiscence by including in it thoughts and impressions that were not occasioned at the time: "I didn't even think it". The ambiguity of this conflict, however, could be said to make Rhys's criticism of social inequality more powerful by undermining the possibility of a simple interpretation or solution.

The dress shop scene is one of a number of reminiscences in which Sasha attempts to mitigate her present unhappiness – despite the fact that the 'negative' voice tells her quite clearly that this will only make her unhappier. Near the end of the novel, she asks the gigolo, René, to whistle a tune which in turn makes her think of an episode or story from her past (*GMM*, p. 147). Linett and Angier link this memory to the at least partly truthful narrative of abuse Rhys wrote in the Black Notebook (Linett, 2005, pp. 445; Angier, 1992, p. 29). The negative voice recognises the harm inherent in this reminiscence, remarking in parenthesis "For God's sake watch out for your film mind" (*GMM*, p. 147). Even her memories themselves are interrupted by qualifications that undermine their truthfulness, as can be seen in the account she gives of her (now ended) marriage. A break in this narrative is bridged with the phrase "What happened then?...Well, what happens?" (*GMM*, p. 99). This can be seen as an attempt to connect with her imagined audience, an appeal to the universal nature of the experience she presents. However, it also gives the impression that

she is framing her story with this end in mind, fitting the memory into the mould of a set story of unwise marriage and the impulsive way of living that follows it. Sasha ends her reminiscence with the phrase “Did I love Enno [her husband] at the end? Did he ever love me? I don’t know” (*GMM*, p. 119).

Sasha is, like us, a reader, and this is clearest in her uncertainties about the content of the things that she reads. This uncertainty extends to her judgements about others. This is similar to the somewhat artificial unwillingness the protagonists of Rhys’s other novels had in judging other characters. However, where the third-person narrative voice in *Quartet* was able to make perceptive statements about Lois and Heidler as long as Marya remained uncertain, both perception and uncertainty are fully internalised in *Midnight*. Sasha gradually connects with René due to the similarity of their *experience*. When Sasha tells him the story of a rich woman she received money from for writing stories, René works past her initial disbelief to prove that he has been to the same house, has accepted money from the same idle rich woman (*GMM*, p. 141-142). Speaking in the ‘negative’ voice Sasha claims that this revelation actually makes them suspicious of each other – read as an isolated event it is an unsettling coincidence. However, in terms of the story’s progression it is part of the way her empathetic connection with René overcomes her desire to hurt him as revenge for how she has been hurt. At the same time, René’s *style* of talking, his exaggerated mannerisms and clichéd compliments, prompts Sasha to continue to mistrust him. Noting a shift in his manner into “a polite formal, voice” when he is asking her to come for an *apéritif* with him, she thinks “Very quick, very easy, that change of attitude, like a fish gliding with a flick of its tail, now here, now there” (*GMM*, p. 127). Again the ‘negative’ voice can be seen as protective, a counterbalance to the ‘positive’ voice’s empathy. For Sasha people are never

simply one thing. The centrality of the protagonist to our experience of the world of Rhys's novels means that, by extension, this novel cannot be read according to a single meaning.

Sasha's failure to come to a decision about René in particular has consequences for the novel's end. Indeed, the way this novel ends, along with the way that many critics (with notable exceptions) rush to impose a definite meaning on it, is the strongest evidence for the ambiguous nature of the novel. Throughout *Midnight*, the character Sasha feels the most apathetic towards is the guest who occupies the room next to hers, an often scornful salesman only ever seen in a dressing gown. At the end of the novel, after rejecting René's eventually violent advances in her hotel room and convincing him to leave, Sasha attempts to overcome what she sees as her inner negativity by willing his return. Eventually the door of her room does open, but it is not René, it is the salesman in the more attractive of his two dressing gowns (*GMM*, pp. 156-158). To him, a man she seemingly hates, she makes the assent that she could not make to René. For Angier, this is the most dark of all of the endings of Rhys's novels. "Accepting" this harbinger of death "means accepting she is the same as all the other poor devils of human beings, all the pitiful fools, all the defeated. It means accepting she is a dog after all" (Angier, 1992, p. 382). Sasha's capitulation to the man in the dressing gown is a surrender to society's characterisation of her as no better than a whore.

Yet, if this is really the message of hopelessness that the ending implies, how can we explain the sense that Sasha herself gives to her act? Sasha embraces the dressing-gown man at the same time as promising to never again "despise another poor devil of a human being", making the moment seem less like a forlorn acceptance of defeat and more like a victorious avowal of empathy (*GMM*, p. 159). Elgin Mellown chooses to focus on this aspect

of the scene in his reading of the novel as the endpoint of the story of the “Rhys woman”. Mellown writes that “Sasha overcomes the drift towards death that obsessed the earlier manifestations of the Rhys woman by finding this compassion and in some way it so alters her character that she is no longer a subject for the novelist” (1972, p. 467). Other critics also miss the ambiguity of the novel’s end to fit it into whatever interpretative framework they impose on the novel. Abel for example, states that Sasha’s rejection of the gigolo comes from her “fear of the physical world” even as her relationship with him “awakens in her a desire for unity” (1979, p. 167). The encounter with the dressing-gown man that follows this rejection is “a kind of psychic triumph” despite being “deeply ironic” (1979, p. 167). Abel moves past any sense of irony in the scene because, for her, the important element of the scene is Sasha overcoming the alienation from her body that characterises her schizophrenic discourse.

In contrast to these limited approaches, Arnold Davidson provides one of the most nuanced readings of both the end of the novel and its overall tone, stating that Sasha’s “yes” to the *commis voyageur* is “an ambiguous affirmation, yes to the morning and yes to the night” (1983, p. 364). Both the voices summarised above are present in this scene. Sasha’s rejection of René comes from the negative voice, a voice she represses following René’s exit, remarking that the “Damned voice in my head[...]has gone. I am alone” (*GMM*, p. 157). Speaking in the positive voice, Sasha regrets her earlier rejection of René and wills him to return. The fact that it is not René who returns, but the ghostly dressing-gown-clad man, means that there is no simple resolution to Sasha’s story.

This is made all the more apparent by the way this end confuses the roles the two voices

play for the novel's last few lines. The experiential focus of the voice which wills René's return, designating it according to my terms as the positive voice, can be seen in its backward focus on what *might* have happened with René. That the voice which sent René away is what I have described as the style-focused negative voice can be seen in its instinctive knowledge of how best to both hurt the gigolo and save Sasha from further hurt by asserting that all René cares about is her money. The entrance of the dressing-gown-clad man into Sasha's room is both a method of ending the novel without siding with either voice and of inverting the two voices, showing that it is not a simple question of an affirming voice and a contradictory one. I would contend that the voice which puts an affirming meaning on the event is the negative one Sasha felt she had vanquished, since the triumphant side of the event is dependent upon the role the dressing-gown-clad man plays in microcosm, defying our expectations and standing as a local metaphor for the universality of Sasha's empathy. Our misgivings about the scene on the other hand come from the positive experiential side, the novel in macrocosm, in that Sasha's acceptance of the dressing-gown-clad man is contrary to her sense of self and the image the rest of the novel has built up of the character who she accepts into her bed.

In this chapter I have aimed to adopt a critical perspective which takes greater account of the way Rhys's novels delay and problematise interpretation. It is this ending which cements the status of *Good Morning, Midnight* as the best example of this. The novel's ambiguity persists right until its end; an end which I would argue is perfectly balanced between two meanings. Despite this, *Good Morning, Midnight* is no more immune to the act of interpretation as Rhys's other work, as can be seen in the critical readings of the novel's end summarised above. In this it can be seen that fiction can only achieve the delaying of

interpretation. Defamiliarisation as a fictional technique loses out to the psychological imperative of familiarisation in the end. That being said, I feel that a deeper insight into the way Rhys's novels function as works of literature can be gained from an attempt to sustain the ambiguous balance they construct between style and experience. This preservation of ambiguity also highlights the partiality of most critical approaches of Rhys's work, which necessarily trade a comprehensive understanding of her novels for the ability to interpret their meaning.

## Chapter 2: Doris Lessing

Lessing's protagonists in novels like *The Grass is Singing* and *Martha Quest* are creatures formed and controlled by social forces. As Lessing's fiction develops, however, her attempts to posit a sense of the individual as an independent entity with the potential to heal and reform wider society grow more overt. That being said, Lessing never really abandons the former philosophy. Each attempt by Lessing to frame experience is balanced by a corresponding and unique type of stylistic dissonance, a feeling that language cannot capture the sense of self the novels gesture towards. In this context the contradictions in Lessing's extratextual interventions in the critical debate surrounding her novels can be seen as reflections of the dual nature of her fiction. For example, her "irritation" at the autobiographical reading of the early volumes of her Children of Violence novel sequence despite her acceptance that her "interest" in writing them was in "Truth" and "Facts" points toward the conclusion that this sequence is both autobiographical and entirely fictional – it deploys Lessing's personal experience but also diverges from "the literal truth" in its quest to capture the "atmosphere" of the period (Lessing, 1995, p. 160-162).

Lessing's ambiguity in the case of her own personal connection to her fiction results in less certainty about this on the part of critics. Critical approaches like those of Gardiner and Greene to Lessing's works can be seen as similar to that of Thomas and Harrison to Rhys's novels, based as they are on Lessing's status as a hypothetical source of subaltern feminine experience. What is lacking in criticism of Lessing's work, however, is the detailed and comprehensive autobiographical reading of her work seen in Angier's biography of Rhys.



This however, does not invalidate the similarity in the way that Lessing's and Rhys's work deploy personal experience and are read restrictively by critics who focus upon it.

As an example of the experiential critical tendency, Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins note "Lessing's resistance to categorization" at the beginning of their introduction to a recent collection of essays on the author (Ridout and Watkins ed., 2009, p. 2). This is part of an approach to Lessing that positions her as a transgressive writer, one who fits uneasily if at all into the structural forms of generic and critical categories. This sets the theme for the collection as a whole, hence the subtitle "Border Crossings". Ridout and Watkins's introduction is useful at this stage as a distillation of some of the main concerns of experiential critics. In such an analysis, "borders" are something imposed by critics, while Lessing's "crossing" of them means that an accurate understanding of her work must rely on an understanding of the composite experiential subject that both authors it and is its protagonist. Though below I examine experiential critics who rely variously upon an understanding of Lessing as a feminist, Jungian, or Laingian writer, a constant between them is this positing of subjective experience as an interpretative solution to fiction which reflects social division in its own ambiguity.

Conversely Molly Hite's analysis addresses itself more fundamentally to the structure and language of particular novels within Lessing's oeuvre. Hite focuses on *The Golden Notebook* in particular, arguing that its meaning lies in its complex and intricate structure rather than in its 'story'. Hite, as is explored below, also uses the analogy of the Möbius strip, principally to highlight the intricacy of *The Golden Notebook's* structure. While experiential critics, it will be seen below, seek only to highlight the contradictions in Lessing's work that make it

resistant to formal analysis, stylistic critics like Hite stress the way the structures of Lessing's novels, along with specific phrases and events within them, undermine the holistic worldview that could be said to lie behind them. Hite remarks that "both *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-gated City* are about coherence, while neither is by realist conventions coherent" (1988b, p. 17). Though Hite is, as such, more accepting of the dual nature of Lessing's fiction than other critics, this phrase betrays a feeling that the 'content' of a work of fiction, the sense of it formed in the reading experience, has less bearing on its inherent nature in comparison to its style – the telling is therefore more important as a subject of analysis than the told.

I aim to affirm the potential of an approach to Lessing's work that gives equal weight to both style and experience. The first section of this chapter looks at a wide range of experiential critics, from Judith Kegan Gardiner's and Gayle Greene's readings of Lessing's work as a representation of female experience through to Roberta Rubenstein's reading of her novels as a progressive development of a unified and centred self, best understood with reference to Jungian theory. The section following this will look at stylistic critics including one, Jeannette King, whose approach to Lessing's work also draws upon Lacanian psychoanalysis. Though King's use of theory, like that of other stylistic critics, gives a precise insight into particular elements of Lessing's fiction I agree with Perrakis in the sense that King neglects the "dynamic reading experience" of Lessing's novels (1992, par. 8). Most notably, and in common with other stylistic critics, this is seen in a failure to understand the importance of the promise of wholeness and transcendence found in Lessing's fiction. In the last section of this chapter, I attempt an analysis of Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* which recognises both its apparent unity as an experiential construct as well as a stylistic

complexity which runs counter to this unity.

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Just as critics of Rhys's work read it as a source of subaltern female experience, many critics read Lessing's work as a record of experience which in its immediacy avoids the distortions and power imbalances that characterise linguistic structures. As mentioned in the last chapter, Gardiner was to group Lessing and Rhys together with Christina Stead because of the importance of the concept of empathy to their fiction. Gardiner argues that empathy is "necessary" for all three authors in order to "change history and so establish a meaningful female identity" (1989, p. 18). Though this identity may represent "itself as divided", "the idea that self and authenticity are meaningless illusions or epiphenomena of discursive practices may itself be seen as a consequence of contemporary alienation" (Gardiner, 1989, p. 19). For Gardiner then the key element of Lessing's work for the purposes of analysis is the way it moves toward this formation of identity. In this understanding of Lessing's fiction a reader's motivation in reading the text is their identification with the process of self-formation undertaken by the central protagonist. This protagonist is at times indistinguishable from the author, in that "the woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathetic identification with her character" (Gardiner, 1981, p. 357).

Before Gardiner used the concept of empathy to link Lessing and Rhys's fiction (along with

Christina Stead's), she drew directly on Nancy Chodorow's theories on the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship to feminine identity, positing the possibility that female authors relate to their female protagonists as mothers to their daughters (1981, p. 349). The confusion, indeed the *rejection*, of boundaries inherent in the experiential reading of Lessing's work means that the division between author and protagonist is apt to dissolve. Looking at the confusions in identity in the way that Lessing describes her relationship with her mother in her autobiography along with the way Martha relates to her mother in "The Children of Violence" sequence illustrates this, as well as supporting Gardiner's more general assertion of the fluidity of the empathetic identifications that characterise Lessing's fiction. Perhaps the best single example is the moment in her autobiography in which Lessing describes the death of her mother. Lessing states that if she saw her mother at the time she was writing she "would simply put [her] arms around her" (Lessing, 1998, p. 203). The version of her mother Lessing visualises herself embracing is a much younger one, her mother as a child. In this scene therefore Lessing views her mother as a character, empathising with her as a result. This is something Lessing arguably also does in novels such as *Martha Quest*, in which Martha's mother shares numerous similarities with the picture Lessing paints of her own mother in her autobiography. The inversion present in the above-mentioned example from Lessing's autobiography makes it a clear example of the author/mother-character/child relationship that Gardiner describes. It also demonstrates the way in which the boundaries between author and character can become blurred in the experiential framework which surrounds Lessing's work – Lessing's mother is after all playing Lessing's own historical part in the hypothetical encounter.

The applicability of particular moments like this in non-fictional works to the analysis of

Lessing's fiction as a whole is also supported by the blurred nature of the boundaries between her different writings. Since, in this view, Lessing is developing her sense of self through fiction, every work where she engages with her own identity is relevant to an analysis of her fiction. Ellen Cronan Rose can accordingly compare Lessing's relationship to "her" mother in *Under my Skin* (the first volume of her autobiography) and in *Martha Quest* on equal terms, with no allowance made for the fact that Mrs Quest is not Lessing's mother, but Martha's (Rose, 1995, p. 12). Because the reader's experiential connection to the text is also dependent on identification they are drawn into this relationship, which then becomes a rough triangle between the reader, the author/protagonist and the world the novel evokes through the protagonist's perceptions.

The *directness* of such a relationship is important to experiential critics due to the way its immediacy circumvents the distortions of linguistic structure. This is particularly important for a critic like Gayle Greene, who remarks that Lessing's "demystification of verbal and ideological systems resonated powerfully with women who were just then developing, in the fifties and sixties, a sense that they inhabited a different reality from that articulated by the dominant culture" (1994, pp. 10-11). For Greene even more so than Gardiner the analysis of Lessing's work, and the central 'identity' it evokes, is dependent upon a comprehensive understanding of the scope of Lessing's fiction as a whole in preference to a close focus on particular novels. That being said, the mention of 'difference' in the above quote is reminiscent of Ireland's warning against interpretative uses of experience discussed in the last chapter, in that such instinctive senses can work in a socially divisive way.

The nature of this divisiveness merits further attention. The sense Lessing's work gives of a

unique subjective experience of the world is necessary to Greene's analysis, beginning as she does by wondering "How to account for this anomalous radical voice on the conservative literary scene of the fifties?" before giving a detailed biographical sketch (1994, p. 1). Such critical approaches wish to study this self in isolation from a society which seems to only mislabel and misconstrue it. This leads to one of the side-effects we saw in Harrison's reading of Rhys – the sense that male readers may possibly be unable to truly grasp such works. Greene, stating uncategorically that she seeks to argue that "*The Golden Notebook* is a feminist novel, both in terms of content and textual strategy", also remarks that "most male reviewers and critics" of the novel "found ways of discounting it" (1994, p. 98, 94). Interestingly, the male reviewers that Greene quotes often also define *The Golden Notebook* as a "women's novel", and the strength of Greene's counter to this lies in her argument that this is precisely what gives it the literary merit which these authors accuse it of lacking. Such an analysis, however, runs the risk of possibly confirming male readers in the belief that such a work is not for them, contributing to the way in which men and women see their experience as untranslatable to those of the opposite sex. This is something risked by Gardiner's approach to Lessing's work as well, in that male readers may not be able to make as deep an empathetic identification with the author-protagonist dyad at the centre of Lessing's fiction.

For Greene, Lessing's own dismissal of feminist readings of *The Golden Notebook* is unimportant, despite the fact that Lessing saw such readings as *discounting* the importance of the way the novel is written (*GN*, pp. 8-10). This is not to say that Lessing's word should be taken as the definitive analysis of the novel, but her criticism here is apt because of the way that Greene represses other potential ways of looking at the novel. The novel's

importance to women, “untroubled by the novel’s violation of New Critical Canon or its status as ‘art’” and “thrilled to find themselves named”, is the key element in understanding *The Golden Notebook* and by extension Lessing’s entire body of work (1994, p. 93). Making such an argument despite the resistance of male readers and Lessing herself is an example of an ‘excavatory’ critical approach, especially in its resemblance to the way the psychoanalyst encounters “resistance” in the process of exploring the unconscious of a patient. The feminism of Lessing’s work is in this view an unconscious feature only present in her work to the trained eye of the critic. This is similar to the way that Paula Le Gallez attempts to uncover such feminism in Jean Rhys’s work, though her approach is based on the style of Rhys’s work rather than a subjectivity drawn from a personal response to the novel’s story.

This sort of approach can be criticised equally from an experiential perspective as from a stylistic one. A Jungian analysis of Lessing’s work, for example, differs in many ways from one based on feminine experience. Jung’s development of his theories was at least partially a movement away from the sexual dynamics of Freudianism. One of the results of this was Jung’s assertion that the mind compensated for the body’s biological gender with an inherited, ageless image (or archetype) of the opposite gender – an “anima” for a man, an “animus” for a woman. Jungian theory suggests in this way that our ability to identify empathetically with people of the opposite gender may be ‘hard-coded’ in the unconscious. This means that a reader’s ability to connect with the search for self on the part of Lessing’s characters is not necessarily determined by their sharing the same gender – they can identify with the universal forms and structures of the emblematic subject’s progress to selfhood.

Of substantial importance in the case of Jungian critics, therefore, is the natural resonance of Jungian concepts of the “self” and “individuation” with a teleological interpretation of Lessing’s fiction. In this reading, Lessing’s fiction is a movement from early pessimistic realist works, in which divided subjects fall foul of oppressive societies, to later fantastical ones which tentatively suggest the possibility that individuals can live in harmony with both themselves and the external world. A prime example of this attitude can be seen in Roberta Rubenstein’s monograph length study of Lessing’s work. Rubenstein, though stating that we might view “three thinkers (Hegel, Marx and Jung) as the philosophical, political and psychological mentors of Lessing’s fictional and intellectual universe”, takes a primarily Jungian view of Lessing’s fiction (1979, p. 9). One of the passages which display this most clearly is useful enough to quote in full:

Since the development of consciousness is an unfolding process both for any individual or character in a novel, and in an author’s canon, what emerges from a chronologically ordered reading of Doris Lessing’s eleven novels is the coherence expressed through the path traced by that evolution of consciousness as it perceives, moves through, and reinterprets successive layers of experience. The author’s dramatizations of this process – the ideas, characters and forms through which they are expressed – cluster around a central core that simultaneously discloses the continuity of the fictional worlds Lessing has created and reveals the author’s own artistic consciousness in various stages of evolution (Rubenstein, 1979, p. 7).



Later in Rubenstein's study it is implied that this centre is analogous to the Jungian concept of "the 'Self', a hypothetical construct representing the totality of the personality in all of its realized and unrealized aspects". Such assertions are supported by the assumption that Lessing herself drew on Jungian ideas in writing her fiction, that "the Jungian model...is compatible with Lessing's own orientation" (Rubenstein, 1979, p. 23).

The above-mentioned difference in attitude toward gender notwithstanding, Rubenstein's approach demonstrates certain elements which it is possible to identify as hallmarks of a focus on experience in Lessing's work. The above passage displays a blurring of boundaries between character, text and author, seen in the seamless movement from the development of a single character's consciousness in a single novel to that of the author over the canon as a whole. Indeed, the former movement is seen as suggestive of the latter. Furthermore, the teleological nature of Rubenstein's interpretation can be seen in the reading of the novels as a single sequence – a development of a central idea. This sequence is a movement toward the heightened sense of self Rubenstein finds in novels such as *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, *The Summer before the Dark* and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1979, p. 19, 109). For Rubenstein, *The Golden Notebook* and the two later volumes of "The Children of Violence" series of novels, *Landlocked* and *The Four-gated City*, are transitional works in this process of development. This 'developmental' approach to Lessing's fiction is something shared with other Jungian approaches to her work. Mary Ann Singleton remarks that "Jung outlined what he felt to be the chief illness of modern society, and Lessing has dramatized the same ideas" (1977, pp. 10-11). It can be seen therefore that Jungian approaches possess a natural

affinity for the experiential features of Lessing's work, as can also be seen in Hinz and Teunissen's approach to *The Golden Notebook* (1973).

Other uses of psychological theory are more dependent on the particular focus of the individual critic, as can be seen in Marion Vlastos's Laingian reading of Lessing's work. The difference between this and Abel's application of Laing's theory on schizophrenia to Rhys's work lies in the different evidence used to support each critic's argument. Rather than look at Lessing's use of language for parallels with Laing's theory, Vlastos's approach relies instead on "the conjunction of their insights" (1976, p. 246). Of primary importance for Vlastos is Laing's philosophical judgement about the nature and importance of mental illness, especially in the sense that "Laing believes it is essential to understand the mad person as symptom and as victim of a sick society and finally as prophet of a possible new world, a world governed by forces of unity rather than of separation" (1976, p. 246). This does indeed strongly correlate with the opinions seemingly endorsed in Lessing's portrayal of the way a character like *The Four-gated City's* Lynda Coleridge is treated for mental illness. Lynda is a profoundly sensitive and (it is revealed finally) telepathic individual, effectively abused in her treatment for schizophrenia by a society that denies the existence of differing states of consciousness. Another particular quality of Vlastos's use of Laing shows its similarity with the experiential approaches laid out above. Vlastos looks in turn at three of Lessing's novels: *The Golden Notebook*, *The Four-gated City* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. Though Vlastos concedes that the novels differ in form, "[t]he ultimate impulse, the ultimate question, remains the same[...] — the question of the survival of the world of humanity" from the social sickness which those described as insane are most sensitive to (1976, p. 253). Lessing's work is defined therefore by its striving for individual unity as a

remedy to social imperfection and division.

We can summarise experiential approaches to Lessing's work in the following terms. All the critics discussed above rely on a 'composite' understanding of Lessing's fiction. This is supported by a theoretical justification along with a blurring of the boundaries between author, character and text. What such an approach can tell us about Lessing's fiction is partly, as with experiential approaches to Rhys, located in its perception of it as a critique of power relations. Unlike Rhys's work however, Lessing's work gives such critics more of a cause for optimism. This optimism can be seen in Greene's relation of the positive reaction of her and other female readers to the portrayal of female experience in *The Golden Notebook*. It can also be seen in the way Jungian readers of Lessing's work see in it proof of the perfectibility of the human psyche. In the above it can be seen that experiential critics, for the most part, read Lessing's fiction as a gradual movement toward the utopian potential of the human mind and society found in novels like *Shikasta* and *The Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. *The Golden Notebook* is one particular stage in this movement. Aside from the way this approach neglects the complexity of *The Golden Notebook* in particular, I feel that experiential approaches to Lessing's work are limited in the same way as similar approaches to that of Rhys and Ballard. The neglect of stylistic features means that they ignore the way Lessing qualifies every attempt at capturing even the most transcendental experience. This persistent habit of contradiction is part of the way Lessing's works draw us in as readers – the moment of revelation is always just around the corner. The very need for critical works that interpret Lessing's promise of transcendence is in many ways a demonstration that its textual manifestation in her novels is potentially nothing more than a promise designed to keep us reading.

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As stated above, Lessing's work is partly a protracted and comprehensive process of generic experimentation. Many critics have acknowledged this and focused on the way language and narrative structure undermine an interpretation of her fiction as a naïve and unmediated transmission of subjective experience. This involves a response which principally focuses on the technique employed in particular novels. For example, Louise Yelin in her analysis of Lessing's *In Pursuit of the English*, a work which many readers would uncritically identify as a non-fictional autobiographical account, displays a painstaking regard for the separation of narrator and author mandated by textual form (1998, p. 58). As in the previous chapter, however, it can be argued that stylistic critics are in many ways as one-sided as Lessing's experiential critics. I contend below that this one-sidedness is to be found in their neglect of the fact that Lessing's work, for all its generic and stylistic divisions, represents a sustained and personal attempt at understanding and, indeed, perhaps even healing a fragmented and pathological society.

The transcendence in Lessing's work is in many ways an extratextual goal promised by the novels but never materially achieved. For this reason, experiential critics rely upon the perceived goal of Lessing's fiction – the ideal state of subjectivity it promises as part of a protracted process of development across Lessing's oeuvre taken as a whole. In contrast, as in the previous chapter, Lessing's stylistic critics focus on the particular features of individual novels. Though they may fit this into a larger framework, such an operation does not require

the perception of a teleological process of development in Lessing's work – elements of Lessing's novels can be considered in isolation as supportive of a particular theoretical interpretation. One example of this can be seen in Alice Markow's approach to Lessing's work. Similarly to Gayle Greene, Markow considers the implications of Lessing's work for feminine subjectivity. However, Markow's completely different focus leads her to a much more pessimistic conclusion about the potential for selfhood open to Lessing's protagonists.

Examining each of the situations Lessing's characters find themselves within in isolation, including their relationships with men and statements about women's role and position within society, Markow concludes that characters like Martha Quest and *The Golden Notebook's* Anna Wulf are "subject to too many dissonant tensions" to move beyond the "mutual exploitation" of male-female relationships (1974, p. 99). This represents a judgement on Lessing's "own generation" and possibly younger women as well (1974, p. 99). Markow's conclusion is based upon isolated examples like Martha's rumination on the "irresistibly satisfying[...]process of self-destruction, self-narrowing" of marriage, but ignores the more indistinct positive, mind-altering *experience* of love that Martha has with Thomas Stern (Markow, 1974, p. 96). Markow's approach to Lessing's work is also emblematic of the way a focus on discourse, isolated elements and stylistic choices can lead to pessimism about what I would describe as the 'promise' of Lessing's fiction – the movement toward selfhood which, though never completed, represents a fundamental part of the way Lessing's protagonists experience the world.

For such critics, the social forces and pressures to conform that Lessing's protagonists encounter seem more like a statement on the problematic nature of identity, rather than the

first stage in the exposition of a unified subjectivity. Louise Yelin employs such an approach, examining as she does the way Lessing's work deploys and is shaped by national and racial identity. As mentioned above, Yelin does not accept the narrative voice of Lessing's work at face value. This is shown both in Yelin's assiduous separation of narrative voice and author in her examination of *In Pursuit of the English*, but also in her dissection of the ways in which Lessing's protagonists in both this and novels like *The Golden Notebook* support forms of social oppression similar to those they condemn. This is due to the limitations on their discourse imposed by the society they live within. For example, Yelin argues that *The Golden Notebook's* "account of gender tends to obscure race" in that it "treats whiteness as racially unmarked and presents Anna and Molly not as white women but as 'women'" (1998, p. 82). The novel "elides class" in a similar way in that "it conflates the situation of Anna and Molly with those of women who occupy different class positions" (Yelin, 1998, p. 82). This is not to say that Yelin does not value Lessing's work – merely that she places a different emphasis on it compared to the experiential critics examined above. By looking in a focused way at the gaps in the discourse Lessing's novels are constructed from, Yelin sees them as social documents. Rather than naively criticising oppressive structures through the deployment of non-structured subaltern experience, Lessing's novels in this view reproduce the power relationships of their contemporary discourses.

Such an understanding of Lessing's work provides a useful corrective to the way which it attempts to use immediate experience as a method of circumventing social structure – the sort of use of experience which is the prime attraction of Lessing's work for critics such as Greene. That being said, such a contextualisation of Lessing's work does run the risk of understating its continuing relevance, as both experience and stylistic construct, in that Yelin

ties the perspectives of Lessing's works very firmly to the racial and social circumstances in which they were written. For example, Yelin focuses on the way that two novels written in the 1980s, *The Good Terrorist* and *The Fifth Child*, "explore a perceived crisis in British national culture in the Thatcher era" (1998, p. 91). This specific focus somewhat neglects the way these novels represent a judgement on society and human behaviour which is still relevant today. Yelin's approach to Lessing's work could be criticised from either a stylistic or experiential perspective. Indeed, Molly Hite's criticism of the way in which the style of *The Golden Notebook* was ignored by many critics applies, at least partially, to Yelin's approach to the novel. Though the language of *The Golden Notebook* is of interest to Yelin, she largely ignores its intricate structure. She also reads the novel's preface, in which Lessing affirms the importance of this structure, primarily as a comment on the state of British literature at the time of writing (1998, pp. 71-75). Yelin's approach is useful, however, due to its highlighting of the problematic, historically influenced nature of identity within Lessing's work.

As in Rhys's work, such sceptical approaches to the unified subjectivity of Lessing's protagonists are often combined with a close focus on the language and narrative style of her novels. Jeannette King, though reading Lessing's novels in chronological sequence in a similar way to Rubenstein, focuses to a greater extent on particular events and turns of phrase. These elements are analysed according to a Lacanian framework, one which draws especially upon the concept of the split subject. Aside from her theoretical focus, King's close examination of Lessing's style can be used to support the perception of a similar irony to that which Le Gallez identified in Rhys's work. One example of this is the "unspecified personal narrator" of many of Lessing third-person novels (King, 1989, p. 4). This is a similar strategy to Rhys's first two novels in which a narrative voice is tied to the perspective of one

particular character but also displays a degree of independence. In Lessing's case this narrator can perceive the inner workings of other characters (as Rhys's did) but it also becomes at times almost ideological: setting out the wider social meaning of a particular event or thought. The consequences of this for a stylistic reading are as follows. Firstly Lessing's novels which employ this device, mostly 'realist' works like *Martha Quest* and *The Grass is Singing*, display dissonance between the narrated and narrating 'I's similar to that which Le Gallez perceived in Rhys's novels. Secondly, there is the more subtle conflict resulting from the fact that the most mature manifestation of social conscience in these novels is effectively separate from the main narrative, externally imposed by a pseudo-authorial voice.

King's use of Lacanian theory is generally in the illustration, or 'diagnosis', of the significance of particular textual events. Lessing's first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, follows the life-story of an impoverished white woman in an unnamed part of Southern Africa, as she gradually loses her grip both on the racial prejudices that characterise the segregated society she lives within and her sanity. A particular event in the novel highlighted as having resonance with Lacanian theory by King is the moment when the protagonist Mary overhears a chance remark characterising her as a sexless curiosity, driving her to look for a husband. King states that "[t]his incident...makes glaringly apparent the instability of so-called 'identity', the absence of an autonomous, unified essential self" independent of symbolic structure (1989, pp. 10-11). This theoretical interpretation helps in the perception of the hopelessness of Mary's state, trapped as she is in an oppressive society without access to the mythology and visions that Lessing's later characters rely upon to escape.



In many ways, however, King's use of Lacanian theory is akin to Rubenstein's use of Jung – in both cases a theoretical model is imposed in order to bring coherence to an ambiguous text. In the example given above from *The Grass is Singing*, a comprehensive understanding of Mary's situation is reliant upon the conflict between the two features this thesis focuses upon. *The Grass is Singing* as an experiential story works on the basis of a connection between the reader and the protagonist, supported by a narrative voice tied primarily to her perspective. In this analysis we identify with Mary's own reading of her life – she would have been happy living the life of an office worker and avoiding any lasting emotional relationships. The society she lives within is so corrupt, after all, that to remove herself from it entirely may be the wisest course of action. A stylistic reading of the novel does not take as much account of the possible destinies open to Mary, since these rely upon a sense of her as an unrestricted subject not directly indicated by the structure of the text. Mary's death is portrayed at the very start of the novel, lending a sense of inevitability to the following narration of her life. When Mary eventually overhears the remark that leads to her marriage, it is merely directing the narrative along the path which we already knew it was going to take – toward her marriage and death. The presence of both of these possibilities in the scene is, I would argue, an essential part of the realistic complexity of the tragedy of Mary's life. To use theory to support one particular possibility, as King does by linking this event to the "instability of so-called 'identity'", is to attempt to deny the other meaning present in the scene, lessening the emotional force of the narrative.

King's approach to Lessing's fiction is most relevant in relation to *The Grass is Singing* and the early volumes of "The Children of Violence". These early novels are largely pessimistic about the ability of the individual to form an identity independent of social forces. The

detailed textual portrayal of subjective fragmentation in *The Golden Notebook* also makes it attractive for an analysis in Lacanian terms. King's theoretical viewpoint provides a unique perspective on the way the novel's style "resists the hierarchization of discourse which determines the relationship of centre to margin" (1989, p. 52). King's theoretical perspective provides an insight into the way the structure of *The Golden Notebook* challenges our trust in the unity of the narrative, at least insofar as it is the representation of a single subject's view of the world. King also recognises the complexity of the novel's structure in and of itself, aside from the scepticism of subjectivity that comes from her Lacanian perspective on the work. That being said, it is this very perspective which makes King's approach to Lessing's work limited according to the terms of my argument. As highlighted above, an over-reliance on a particular theory can lead to a neglect of the alternative possibilities implied by these texts. In *The Golden Notebook* for example the persona of the protagonist could be read as a *centralising* force, the reason for the reader's interaction with the novel as a story. Both King's reading of Lessing's novels as *decentralising* and the perspective of those critics who see them as *centralising* in their experiential development of a unified single perspective are equally valid, drawing as they do on different aspects of Lessing's works.

As Lessing's most structurally complex novel, *The Golden Notebook* has perhaps received the most attention from stylistic critics. Perhaps the stylistic critic who places the most emphasis on the exceptional nature of this novel is Molly Hite. Aside from this one novel, Hite finds the shifts in Lessing's work most interesting seen through the lens of their stylistic features. Remarking that though "calls for a[...]comprehensive consciousness ring through both *The Golden Notebook* and the subsequent work with which it is most often paired and

compared, *The Four-Gated City*", Hite argues that the techniques employed by the two novels show that "Lessing's fictional practice changed radically" in these novels. The nature of this change is effectively Lessing's abandonment of referential realism, turning to fiction "which systematically undermined the form of the traditional novel" and the idea of "coherence" itself (1988b, p. 20). Like the experiential critics above, Hite sees these novels as "transitional", but she focuses on their technical novelty rather than their thematic development of the ideas of previous works (1988b, p. 17). Though the *Canopus in Argos* series of novels which followed the *Four-gated City* are interesting to Hite for the way they continue to move beyond realism by placing "specifically human issues in a more and more cosmic context", it is the radical shift in *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-gated City* that are at the centre of Hite's analysis (1988b, p. 26). Out of the two, it is *The Golden Notebook* which seems to suit Hite's argument better, especially considering the way that *The Four-gated City* seems at first to be "disconcertingly literal-minded" (1988b, p. 23).

Hite cautions, especially in relation to *The Golden Notebook*, against readings of Lessing's fiction which attempt to impose a realist notion of "coherence" on that which is perhaps purposefully incoherent (1988b, pp. 16-17). This can be placed into context with the terms of this thesis if another element of Hite's theoretical perspective is taken into account. As mentioned in the chapter on Jean Rhys, Hite sees the use of feminine 'experience' in literary criticism as an evasion of the "shaping and informing of culture and language" (1988b, p. 482). Its prevalence has led to the paradoxical situation where female writers, who you would expect to be at the forefront of attempts to "challenge the bourgeois, patriarchal subject" by the interrogation of the language which cements it, are seen as the "great upholders of tradition, and particularly of traditional notions of hegemony, even when their

political orientation is feminist” (1988a, p. 483). Hite argues that this is not because of the lack of women writers writing subversive “metafiction” but, as is evidenced principally for her by the misreading of *The Golden Notebook*, because of a tendency to force such experimental novels into the mould of a traditional, experiential text. Notably, Roberta Rubenstein’s reading of *The Golden Notebook* is one of those which Hite describes as being “committed to the notion that *The Golden Notebook* is ultimately coherent by more or less conventional standards” (1988a, p. 484n7).

This criticism of the experiential reading of women’s fiction, and its neglect of the stylistic complexity in works like *The Golden Notebook* in particular, makes Hite probably the most informative source in highlighting the stylistic side of Lessing’s work. Hite’s perspective provides an insight into the way Lessing’s fiction is frequently divided against itself in a particularly purposeful way. However, stylistic approaches like those of King and Hite can be criticised for the way they ignore the empathetic connection Lessing frequently relies upon in her work as an alternative to the coded injustices and distortions of language. Perhaps one of the most referenced pieces of writing by Lessing about her fiction is her 1957 essay “The Small Personal Voice”, in which she remarks that she has sought to comprehend the relationship of the individual with the collective, this being her own personal way of assuring a “commitment” to the realistic portrayal of social issues (1973, p. 6). Many critics affirm that Lessing moved beyond the understanding of fiction that this statement came from, Hite notably arguing that novels like *The Four-Gated City* and *The Golden Notebook* represent a wholesale abandonment of realism and “coherence”.

Though it is the case that the narrative complexity of these works represent a

problematization of a form of subject-focused realism, the *personal* voice remains a device of coherence for the reader looking for continuity between these novels and those that came before. This is especially the case in relation to *The Four-gated City*, the narrative complexity of which is built upon the connection the reader has to the protagonist – a connection built up over the course of the five volumes of “The Children of Violence” as a whole. The dual importance of this experiential coherence and stylistic fragmentation is also important, however, in reading the novel of Lessing’s which is both the most structurally complex and the most comprehensive exploration of the experience of the individual in its relation to society – *The Golden Notebook*.

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The statements Lessing makes about the way her fiction is read are at least partly interventions designed to protect them against interpretation. This is most obvious in the case of the preface she affixed to *The Golden Notebook*. This begins as a specific grievance against the way the novel was read as being about “the sex war”, but develops into a wide ranging argument against the way novels are read critically and academically according to set patterns, with no value placed on individual response (*GN*, pp. 7-21). Lessing’s preface is partly a criticism of the way that the novel has been read as an evocation of female experience, combined with an explanation designed to make the structure of *The Golden Notebook* plain. It also, however, highlights the importance of individual response and, as

such, the experiential connection between novel and reader. Without relying too strongly on Lessing's own interpretation of her novel, I believe that this preface is linked to the way in which the novel attempts to avoid simple meaning, seeing it as an evasion of the complexity of reality and, in a more moral sense, an insult to the depth and range of suffering in the world.

One level of the story of this book is found in the short conventional novel *Free Women* that makes up part of it. This narrative has a style that is somewhat reminiscent of third-person, "realist" novels like *The Grass is Singing* and *Martha Quest*. Though *Free Women* should not be discounted as ironic or less important in a reader's experience of the work as a whole it often seems openly and knowingly trite: it opens for example with the phrase "The two women were alone in the London flat" (GN, p. 25). *Free Women* is the story of Anna, a woman living off the proceeds of her first novel and psychologically unable to write a second. It deals with her life and that of her friend Molly as they negotiate life as uncommitted women in London in the 1960s. Yet, *Free Women* is not the sole narrative of the novel, nor is it allowed to be a continuous one. Instead it is interspersed with sections from a set of notebooks that Anna keeps instead of beginning the novel she cannot bear to write. The idiosyncratic notebooks are a contrast to the linear third-person narrative of the other half of the book. Indeed, as Anna explains, their key characteristic is "chaos", born out of her view that modern life forces us all to live multiple, irreconcilable lives (GN, p. 56). The black notebook deals with Anna's first novel *Frontiers of War*, the red with her political life and relationship with the Communist party, the yellow with her romantic life and the blue with everyday events.

Critics of both the experiential and stylistic sort provide insights in understanding this novel. Greene's reading of the novel principally as an evocation of a woman's experience is understandable in many ways despite Lessing's warning against it. The novel's status as a story rather than a formal experiment is implicitly linked to the empathetic connection a reader shares with its protagonist, Anna. Though, as explored below, it is unclear that the name 'Anna' refers to a single entity, the connection we have with the protagonist of this work is a connection with a particular way of seeing the world, as well as with an earnest and emphatic mode of discourse. The testaments of Greene and many other critics demonstrate the way that *The Golden Notebook* was received by many female readers as a rare and valuable evocation of their way of seeing the world, "thrilled" as they were "to find themselves named".<sup>1</sup> Though this channelling of feminine experience is not the purpose of the work (if the novel can be said to have a purpose at all) this reception is proof of the strength of its presentation and its power to engage a reader with its fictional world.

Experiential critics with a Jungian perspective on Lessing's work naturally see a more mystical purpose behind *The Golden Notebook*. Rubenstein, though accepting that in "one sense *The Golden Notebook* is a metafiction[...]in which both the process and the form are examined", sees the novel ultimately as Anna's linear journey toward a heightened state of consciousness, as well as a stage in the development of the composite Lessing-protagonist (1979, p. 71). For Rubenstein, "the dialectical splits" that characterise the novel can be "resolve[d] into wholes on the level of character, when Anna synthesizes those divisions in

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<sup>1</sup> A more recent, more comprehensive example of this is "The Golden Notebook Project", "an experiment in close-reading in which seven women are reading the book and conducting a conversation in the margins". This is Lessing's novel as a shared female experience, something which draws upon but also helps to construct a unique sense of feminine identity - <http://thegoldennotebook.org/>

her consciousness”, this reveals the “extraordinary multiplicity of the novel” to be “an even more remarkable unity at base” (1979, p. 108). More than anything else, it seems to be the *idea* of wholeness which motivates Rubenstein, most tellingly as she also states that “antimonies on the thematic level can finally be reconciled through the synthesizing capacity of the reader’s own imagination” (1979, p. 108). It is perhaps the theoretical importance of wholeness to Jungian theory which influences this.

Evelyn Hinz and John Teunissen rely on theory in a more overt way, especially in order to discover the reason for “the formulaic quality” of particular moments in the narrative (1973, p. 457). Just as Rubenstein’s analysis tends toward reading the novel as whole because of Jungian theory, so such a perception of “formulaic” elements is dependent upon an external framework supporting their significance in terms of a holistic understanding of the text. Readings of the novel as a journey toward a revelation which Anna has following a period of madness neglect the way the novel consistently warns against revelation and interpretation. That being said, Jungian mythology is a major part of Anna’s experience of the world. Anna’s therapist, Mrs Marks, is a Jungian. Though her interpretations of the reasons for Anna’s unhappiness are frequently rejected by Anna herself, the novel does not provide any easy judgements about the ideologies they contain. Mrs Marks’s therapy is an important part of the matrix of experiences and philosophies through which Anna attempts to understand the world and break through the sense of blockage she feels. Another example of this can be seen in the way Anna criticises Communism while still defending the feeling she gets from it (*GN*, p. 151). Shosana Felman notes the way that readers of James’s *The Turn of the Screw* tend to participate in and share the preoccupations of the novels’ characters, who are themselves readers (1977, p. 97, 114). In many ways this is what we do, or are meant to do,



as readers of *The Golden Notebook*. The way Anna understands the world is profoundly complex and multifaceted – elements of her dreams are indeed Jungian in form, just as elements of the way she thinks about politics remain Communist despite her disillusionment. With this in mind such experiential theoretical criticism as that briefly summarised here can help us to understand the symbolism of Anna's psyche.

What it neglects however, as Molly Hite argues most forcefully, is the formal complexity of the novel. Above, in the introduction, I remarked that Lacan used the Möbius strip as an analogy for the way the unconscious and conscious minds were both arbitrarily and yet unavoidably divided. Hite argues that *The Golden Notebook* "reveals itself to be a Möbius strip" in the way that the two narratives of the novel, *Free Women* and the notebooks, both contradict and rely inherently on the other (1988b, p. 20). The intricate nature of the novel is only revealed gradually. At first the relationship of the two parts of the novel seems simple and defined. Anna is a character in *Free Women*, a writer who feels she can no longer write. In the first section of this novel within a novel, Anna is chastised for this by both Molly and Molly's son Tommy. They are particularly uncomprehending of her habit of writing only in four, separately coloured, notebooks, kept private to avoid spreading "an awful feeling of disgust, of futility" (GN, pp. 54-58). The first *Free Women* section ends with Anna taking her notebooks out from a drawer and setting them out in front of her. Straight after this the first section of the black notebook begins, with a description of the appearance of the page and the columns of writing (GN, pp. 68-71). We are meant to assume initially that *Free Women* is the master "story" narrative of the novel, while the notebooks are documentary artefacts kept by the main character of this novel.

This interpretation is undermined partly through several discrepancies between the two narratives. A relatively obvious discrepancy is the differing plot arcs relating to the character Tommy. One of the most dramatic threads in *Free Women* is Tommy's attempted suicide, caused by his feeling that the choice between a life as a successful businessman like his father or as a penniless political bohemian like his mother is one he is unwilling to make. Tommy's act blinds him and, according to Anna, turns him into something of a monster, his earlier judgemental nature augmented by almost supernatural intuition (*GN*, pp. 333-334). A sense of dissonance may greet the reader when looking for mention of this plot arc in the notebooks however. Here there is no mention of attempted suicide or of dramatic confrontations and arguments with Tommy about Anna's hypocrisy. This may at first be put down to the fragmentary nature of the notebooks. Yet the branching nature of the two stories is made gradually apparent by remarks that point towards two possible destinies for Tommy. In the notebooks Tommy is a slightly difficult young man who gets married to a left-wing sociologist and became involved in social democratic politics (*GN*, pp. 325-326). In *Free Women* a blind Tommy becomes close friends with his father's neglected second wife, eventually moving in with her and becoming involved in business like his father, though with a more "progressive" agenda (*GN*, p. 575).

There are also sections where we are lead to believe that the notebooks represent the 'master' narrative of the novel. The penultimate section, entitled "The Golden Notebook", details the eventual breakdown of the division between the four coloured notebooks listed above, including the narration of a period in which Anna comes to terms with her own division through a period of temporary madness exacerbated by her relationship with an intensely neurotic man called Saul. At the end of this section Anna trades the fifth, and final,

gold coloured notebook with Saul in return for the first line of her next novel, which she now feels able to write. It begins, like *Free Women*, “The two women were alone in the London flat” (GN, p. 25, 554). This section is followed by the final section of *Free Women* in which Anna’s experience with Saul reappears, in condensed form, with a man named Milt. However, *this* relationship gives Anna the courage *not* to write. Instead she decides to work in a “marriage welfare centre” a doctor she knows is thinking of starting (GN, p. 576). The notebook account of Anna’s relationship with Saul comes before her relationship with Milt in *Free Women*. This, along with the way the end of the notebook narrative suggests that its protagonist authored *Free Women*, seems to indicate the superiority, or rather ‘exteriority’, of the narrative found in the notebooks.

However, if the notebooks are the narrative and *Free Women* the document then what is the provenance of the notebooks? This would seem to be an unnecessary question if the novel did not invite it itself. As we have mentioned the notebooks contain descriptions of the appearance of the writing and the layout of the pages, including telling us when certain passages have been “underlined twice” or obscured with “heavy black line[s]” (GN, p. 150, 423). The best explanation is that the notebooks are written by the Anna of *Free Women*, a novel written by the Anna of the notebooks. Lessing states in the preface “The Notebooks are kept by Anna Wulf, a central character of *Free Women*” (GN, p. 7). The novel is wrapped around itself, inner folded around outer until outer becomes inner. Consider one half of the novel to be subsidiary or attempt to read its sections in isolation and it collapses. Hite’s use of the metaphor of a Möbius strip is useful here once more. If a Möbius strip is cut in half along its centre line it does not produce two Möbius strips, but a single strip with two twists which lacks the interesting properties of the original.

The two narratives of the novel are contradictory in other ways. *Free Women* uses the focused third-person style of Lessing's novels previous to *The Golden Notebook*. The voice in the notebooks shifts but is primarily the first-person style used in the 'documents' of both *Shikasta* and the appendix of *The Four-gated City*, both of which utilise an almost epistolary style to counterbalance their fantastical content. The 'provenance' question mentioned above comes from this difference, as does the sense that Lessing is not being altogether serious with the conventional narrative of *Free Women*. The two sections of *The Golden Notebook* also thematically and diegetically criticise each other. The nature of *Free Women* as a particularly standard, referential realist text undermines the seriousness of the crisis which caused notebook Anna's writer's block – it is to be remembered that, according to the notebooks, *Free Women* is Anna's much delayed second novel. The reader might justifiably wonder if, considering the conventional and almost trite nature of *Free Women*, the period of crisis that ends the notebooks was really all that revelatory. Anna's other destiny, the work in a women's centre that ends the narrative of *Free Women* itself, is an evasion of a different kind. Anna is, in abandoning writing altogether, simply discounting the potential of fiction to apprehend reality. Since each account is written by the protagonist of the other, I would contend that each is a failure according to the terms of the 'writer' of the other.

Failure in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms is evidence of the split between the conscious and unconscious minds. Indeed, a stylistic way of reading the two narratives would be as a dialogue between the conscious (the finished, polished, attractive novel that is *Free Women*) and the unconscious (writer's block, abortive discussions about film adaptations, the impossibility of capturing life – the issues that make up the four notebooks) of the act of writing. Another, more thematic, way would be to suggest that Anna, for all her

intransigence in the face of the complexity of reality, has merely repressed that which Mrs Marks suggests is the way for her to be happy – the authoring of a novel. *Free Women* could then be the unconscious discourse in the Freudian sense that it is a repressed wish, while the notebooks are the conscious discourse of the neurotic. In my analysis so far of Lessing and Rhys's fiction I have attempted to show the ways in which a key part of this act of interpretation, this designation and excavation of 'unconscious' meaning, is a presentation of a work of fiction as a unitary enterprise with a single goal. Instead of designating one of these narratives as the hidden, unconscious one, I would contend that the relationship between them is a dynamic and shifting one. In the particular case of *The Golden Notebook* this approach requires a reader to abstain from viewing either of the novel's narratives as a source of the work's true meaning, instead accepting their dual, though contradictory, importance in the text's construction.

Another element of the novel works as a further complication of any imposition of unitary meaning, seemingly in a way that is more detrimental to experiential readings of the work. Hite remarks that "reviews of *The Golden Notebook* treated it as biography; Anna Wulf was Doris Lessing, and not one of the reviewers even gestured at what may seem now like the most obvious question: which Anna Wulf?" (1988a, pp. 482-483). There are at least two Annas, a notebook Anna and a *Free Women* Anna. Beyond this, the Anna of the notebooks is herself divided in her attempt to segregate the chaos of her life into four separate discourses. This second division engenders others, most notably in the yellow notebook. This notebook contains Anna's attempts to turn a recently ended relationship into a novel called "The Shadow of the Third" (*GN*, pp. 196-197). The protagonist, Ella, is also a writer, and many of her ideas for novels are similar to those Anna has for her second one,

eventually culminating in one about “A man and a women[...]both at the end of their tether. Both cracking up because of a deliberate attempt to transcend their own limits” (*GN*, pp. 405-411). This further complicates any attempt to fit the protagonists into a hierarchy, since Ella’s idea for her novel presages Anna’s ‘mad’ experience with Saul narrated in “The Golden Notebook” section at the end of the book. Fragmentation of Anna’s self happens in a chaotic manner then, with no clear end to the profusion of different selves. The number of different protagonists of the novel, along with the way that names repeat and interact with each other throughout the different sections, portray a subjective field in which there are no landmarks for us to navigate from, no firm place to stand.

Earl Ingersoll remarks that reading the novel is to subject oneself to a “vertiginous *mise en abîme* effect” – the markers we are used to working from in most fiction, characters, places, names, events, are unstable in this work (2007, p. 194). Reading *The Golden Notebook* solely upon the basis of experience is inadequate since the way the novel is written provides no guarantee of subjective authenticity or even consistency in terms of whose experience is being evoked. What Hite criticises especially forcefully is the way this leads to evasion on the part of some critics, as if the intricate structure of the novel could simply be ignored. However, even a critic such as Patrocínio Schweickart, who is interested in the novel’s stylistic complexity, notes that the novel’s structure is “easy to circumvent” (1985, p. 263).

Neglecting the novel’s structure represents an insufficient response to its ambiguity. Similar criticism, however, can be directed at those who dismiss the possibility of experiential coherence within the novel out of hand. Hite begins one of her analyses of it by arguing that coherence is something that Lessing has abandoned by this point, it being a

symptom of the earlier mode of realism she employed for novels like *The Grass is Singing* (1988b, pp. 17-20). Yet, coherence is vital in many ways to our experience of reading *The Golden Notebook*. At the very least Lessing relies upon a reader bringing an expectation of a classical realist text to the novel. This expectation works as a baseline which in many ways enables the work's radical experimentation, in the sense that it sets itself against the idea of the classical realist novel as inadequate in capturing the chaos of modern life. This is something we will also see in the next chapter in Ballard's novels *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*. In *The Golden Notebook* it is particularly evident in the way that *Free Women*, though it may seem to be tongue in cheek at times, retains the referential realist mode of Lessing's previous novels. *Free Women* remains as central to the creation of meaning in the whole work as the more experimental notebooks – as explored above, neither half can be said to be the novel's 'master' narrative. It is to be remembered that one of the "endings" of the novel is Anna's production of *Free Women* itself, meaning that realist narrative is accepted, even if partly ironically, as a method of understanding reality.

Focusing solely on *The Golden Notebook's* structure neglects the way the novel relies upon experience which is itself inimical to structure. Certain periods in Anna's past, key to her sense of self, seem to resist systematic description. Anna is fixated upon a limited series of events, though she may change the names involved and look at it from different perspectives and through the lenses of different narrative styles. One way of looking at the multiple evocations of Anna's time in Africa for example, or her brief relationship with a figure variously called Saul, Milt or Dave, is indeed to argue that it points toward the inescapable fragmentation of experience, the way that the human mind fails to encompass or explain an ineffable reality. Another way of understanding it, however, would be to see it

as evidence of Anna's inability to escape from her experiences, despite the different emphases and rhetorical techniques she employs.

An example of this dual meaning can be found at the beginning of the black notebook, where Anna attempts to describe truthfully the events in Africa which inspired her first novel *Frontiers of War* (GN, pp. 78-150). Supporting the stylistic, 'difficulty of representation' argument is the fragmentation this duplication of narration (the implied narrative of Anna's first novel, and her revised account found in the notebook itself) suggests. Supporting the experiential 'fixation on a particular set of events' argument is the fact that her repetitive narration indicates that she is still emotionally attached to the period the two accounts recount. Her disavowal of both accounts, especially her rejection of the "nostalgia" of the Black Notebook narrative, could be said to point both to her emotional investment in the events portrayed but also to her feeling that there is a truthful version of this period out there *somewhere* – if it cannot be reproduced then the fault may lie with language rather than with reality (GN, p. 150).

A useful parallel here is the psychoanalytical theory of repetition compulsion, something which is also useful in looking at Ballard's *Atrocity Exhibition*. "Repetition compulsion" was something which required something of a radical change in Freud's understanding of the human mind. Confronted by the way that First World War soldiers suffering from shell shock compulsively relived traumatic experiences, Freud found he had to revise his understanding of unconscious mental processes as only conducive to subjective pleasure – leading to his positing of a "death drive" as an opposing force to the "pleasure principle" that he previously felt was the main unconscious motivator of human behaviour (Freud, 2006, pp.



137-143, 192-195). Lacan's rereading of the death drive suggests that it is related to the way the subject must experience pleasure within the bounds of symbolic law (Lacan, 2006, pp. 714-716; 1988, pp. 206-208).

A simpler, oppositional, way of understanding the repetition of traumatic memories would be to suggest that we are both attempting to escape the displeasure they cause through seeking a stylistic configuration that is acceptable to our state of mind (preserving our pleasure) and being compelled to *stay* in the moment itself to relive an experience, no matter how horrible, which we feel is so central to our sense of self. Without suggesting either that her memories of Africa are traumatic or that such theories could 'explain' them if they were, Anna's dual motives in reliving the period can be read in such a manner. The different emphases Anna places on the event are both an attempt to escape the 'real' event by replacing it with a linguistic proxy and an attempt to return to it as an essential part of her self. Despite or perhaps because of the contradiction of the two aims the resulting narrative fragmentation is a frustration and a failure of both. This I would argue is evidence of the perfectly balanced ambiguity of this novel.

In this it is typical of Lessing's work as a whole in its refusal to countenance any simplistic interpretation of reality. Characters like Anna and Martha are complex, ambiguous entities best understood as both central, experiencing subjects and fragmented linguistic constructs. Like protagonists in the rest of Lessing's work, part of the progress of their narratives is towards a resolution of this split – an attempt to satisfy their desire for an unconflicted, unified state of subjectivity. Yet, just as the eagerness Felman sees on the part of readers of *The Turn of the Screw* to interpret replicates the mistakes of the characters of James's novel

in their guise as readers, so the attempts of Lessing's characters to understand the world can fool us into thinking that 'understanding' the novels is the most important part of reading them. Any single interpretation of Lessing's work is something of an evasion of its complexity. As mentioned above, such straightforward understanding is also a trivialisation of the seriousness of the flaws Lessing portrays in the fabric of 20<sup>th</sup> century society. The impossibility of resolving the conflict inherent in Lessing's work is something I have tried to show most clearly in my above exploration of *The Golden Notebook*, but it is also something which is apparent in her other works, all of which display a perfectly balanced ambiguity between the possibility of perfectibility inherent in the subjective experience of the world, and the way this possibility is undermined by the stylistic methods of its representation.

### Chapter 3: J G Ballard

One of the main purposes of this chapter is to maintain the relevance of the stylistic-experiential model developed above to Ballard's work, despite the different nature of the division between his stylistic and experiential critics. Suiting the fact that I have linked the division between experiential and stylistic to the tendency of many critics to present their readings as "excavations" of the true meaning of an author's work, I explore below how the worth of Ballard's own life experience as an analytical tool may have been rendered less attractive to many critics by the open assertion of the autobiographical nature of his work in Ballard's statements about his fiction, the paratext surrounding his novels (such as covers, font choices and blurbs) and the immediate responses to his work of reviewers and interviewers writing in the mainstream press. The prominence, indeed the *obviousness*, of an experiential approach based on Ballard's own experience should not lead us to disregard the insight it can provide.

The criticism of Ballard's work by Andrzej Gasiorek and Samuel Francis display a markedly different sort of experiential focus in their reliance upon the *perspective* of an abstract subject of the phenomenology of an often surreal world. In the same way the resonance of much stylistic criticism with particular theoretical frameworks and models of divided subjectivity can be seen as a common but ultimately unnecessary feature of adopting such a perspective on a particular work of fiction. This argument is made below first of all in moving from 'perspectival' experiential readings of *Crash* such as Gasiorek's, through a debate about the novel's ethics which interests me partly because of its highlighting of

Ballard's use of morality as a stylistic device, to Paul Youngquist's visual but stylistic approach to the novel. Youngquist analyses *Crash* as a primarily visual landscape, but one which specifically elides the possibility of subjective agency. Jeannette Baxter's approach to Ballard's work is similarly visual but impersonal – deploying Surrealism as a stylistic praxis of literary production rather than a philosophy of reality comprehension and creation. Following this, and before moving on to a close reading of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, I look at Roger Luckhurst's stylistic perspective on Ballard's work, noting that his criticism of the autobiographical “façade” of Ballard's work is part of a limited statement on its ambiguity – one which is, however, at the service of a definitive theoretical interpretation.

It may be useful however to begin this chapter by looking at the elements of Ballard's fiction's reception and portrayal in the mainstream which Luckhurst sees as misleading as to its true meaning. Ballard himself has been fairly sanguine about the possibly autobiographical nature of his fiction – it is a common trope of interviews with the author along with popular articles and reviews of his works. For example, speaking about his portrayal of a radical eco-feminist group in *Rushing to Paradise* in an interview with Andrew Billen, Ballard states that “women are a lot stronger than men” before adding as an afterthought “one saw that in the camp as a child” (Billen, 1994). Above, I highlighted Hite's remark about the lack of attention paid to the intricate structure of Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. Hite related this lack to the persistent personalisation and deradicalisation of the work of female authors (1988a, p. 483). In contrast, the use Ballard made of his own experience has not elicited a personalising or deradicalising critical response.

The lack of a response to Ballard's work comparable to Nancy Harrison's instinctively

personal yet theoretically informed reading of Jean Rhys's fiction is indeed striking and worthy of more detailed analysis elsewhere. More relevantly to my argument, insofar as the 'autobiographical' critics of Lessing and Rhys aim to uncover the concealed personal meaning of fiction that presents itself as general and not literally true, the paratext of Ballard's fiction can be said to enact this excavation of personal meaning itself, making such a task unnecessary for a literary critic. I feel that this particular aspect of Ballard's work and its reception makes a useful introduction to this chapter – primarily because it demonstrates how the literary criticism of Ballard's work, though nuanced and perceptive of particular aspects and tendencies of his fiction, is defined primarily by what it *does not* address. It is directed, to an extent, by the excavatory logic of interpretation, a tendency to seek out hidden meaning rather than recognise the inherently ambiguous nature of Ballard's fiction.

The key event in the uncovering of personal meaning by the release and reception of Ballard's work was the publication of *Empire of the Sun*, an autobiographical novel which, as Martin Amis later stated, "showed us where Ballard's imagination had come from. The shaman had revealed the source of all his fever and magic" (1996, pp. 8-9). Roger Luckhurst sets his critical perspective firmly against what he sees as the "decoding" of Ballard's earlier work which followed the release of this 1984 novel and the 'sequel', *Kindness of Women*, which followed it (1994, p. 690). Luckhurst includes in what he sees as a misguided tendency the "dominant media reception" of these two novels, including reviews by Charles Murray, W. L. Webb and interviews with the author from David Blow, Peter Kemp and Lynn Barber (1994, p. 690). Since Luckhurst sees the marginality and strangeness of Ballard's fiction as its most important quality, the most misleading aspect of this media reception is the way it uses what it sees as more comprehensible, realistic narratives to "finally decode the bizarre

and perverse aberrations that had gone before, rendering the fiction autobiographically comprehensible” (1994, p. 690). Such readings rely upon an inaccessible reservoir of subjective experience connecting all of Ballard’s work – as *The Kindness of Women* and *Empire of the Sun* are ‘autobiographical’ novels they are seen as closer to the ‘original’ experience which inspired both novels. This interpretation is undoubtedly invited by elements of the paratext of the two ‘autobiographical’ novels as well as statements made by Ballard himself about his fiction.

In contrast to the generically defined covers of Ballard’s previous fiction, the first editions of *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women* are distinguished by a “petition” to be treated differently with “the ‘orientalized’ typography of title and author name in red on a white background” of *Empire* and the softer colour and distinctive font displayed on *Kindness*, along with blurbs that proffer the novels’ autobiographical nature as their key selling point (Luckhurst, 1994, p. 692). The fact that distinctions in presentation have persisted in the latest editions of Ballard’s work supports Luckhurst’s assertion of the construction of an artificial distance between Ballard’s “autobiographical” works and the rest of his fiction – this distance is seen by mainstream reviewers as inviting a composite reading of Ballard’s fiction as an experiential narrative.

In his autobiography Ballard describes the personal nature of his early fiction as something he only realised after he had begun to write fiction dealing more transparently with the real events of his life. Ballard remarks that after the release of *Empire of the Sun* “sympathetic readers of my earlier novels and short stories were quick to spot echoes” in the later novel, suggesting that the “trademark images[...]set out over the previous thirty years[...]could all

be traced back to wartime Shanghai” – this was a connection which Ballard “resisted” but came to accept as “almost certainly true” (Ballard, 2008d, p. 251). As is familiar from the experiential approaches previously studied then, Ballard’s works are presented as a gradual excavation of a particular meaning, moving progressively toward a truer and more personal comprehension of reality. This is a composite approach which both understands Ballard’s work as a homogenous whole and prioritises certain works, namely *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*, as key to understanding. Ballard’s protagonists can often be linked to the author himself in their preoccupations, experiences and even, in the case of *Crash*, *Empire of the Sun*, and *The Kindness of Women*, by their names. Queried in an interview about the fact that the protagonist of *Crash* is named “James Ballard”, the author replied that he “wanted to lay his cards face up on the table” and “be honest about the unconscious impulses that have driven my fiction” (Abbany, 2003, par. 24).

There is an engaging lack of hypocrisy in this attitude. Rather than aim to distance himself from the world of the novel and the often harrowing actions of its characters, perhaps by presenting the book as an aesthetic or abstract exercise, Ballard maintains his closeness to *Crash* and the experience it portrays. This is also the most constructive way of seeing his assertion of the partly autobiographical nature of his fiction in interviews and his autobiography. Ballard’s autobiography *Miracles of Life*, even as a story with no interpretative function in relation to his earlier fiction, repeats the preoccupations and obsessions of his novels. Rather than suggest that Ballard’s curtailed medical degree (with its formative experience of dissection) represents the ‘reason’ for the use of slightly unbalanced medical figures as protagonists of novels such as *The Drought*, *The Crystal World* and *The Day of Creation*, we can see the figure of J G Ballard as medical student as a parallel

iteration of these figures – all present an interest in the physiology of the human body as evidence of an inquisitive, if slightly suspect, attitude to reality. What the flaws of an autobiographical approach should not blind us to is the meaning Ballard's works transmit through the use *certain* novels put personal experience to. Despite this, because the autobiographical nature of Ballard's fiction is a conscious part of the way it is sold to the reader in terms of the appearance of the novels, the statements of the author in interviews and the initial response of reviewers, it is seemingly neutralised as an aspect worthy of critical focus.

The way the framing material surrounding Ballard's novels presents the figure of the author as identical to his work is too much a part of its meaning to be disregarded. The idea of Ballard, life and work, as a symbol of the technological progress and collapse of traditional social structures which characterised the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a central part of the way his works connect with readers, presenting a unified perspective on reality at least partly justified by the experience of the author himself. That being said, his works also deploy experience in a much more subtle way, as is evidenced by the critical approaches studied in the next section. The focus on one particular perspective in Ballard's work exceeds the way Rhys and Lessing tied their narrative style to the world view of their protagonist. In reading Ballard's work an experiential critic can justifiably claim that all elements of the plot and setting of a novel are shaped solely by the perceptions of the central figure – Ballard's brand of science fiction described by the author and his critics as an exploration of "inner space" as a result (Francis, 2011, p. 65). Equally important as this is the way his books puncture the reliability of this experiential, perceptual world through a depersonalising and intricate style. The key is not to try to excavate the hidden meaning of Ballard's work



through a partial and detailed focus which ignores potentially contradictory elements but to allow both the subject-forming, experiential elements and the depersonalising, stylistic ones to influence our understanding of Ballard's work.

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The apparent autobiographical nature of Ballard's novels works well as an introduction to this chapter because it places the particular concerns of both experiential and stylistic critics of Ballard's work in context. The first critical perspective studied in detail in this chapter, the psychological survey of Samuel Francis, has some similarities with experiential psychological analyses of Lessing's work. Francis draws evidence, for example, from a perceived "affinity" between Ballard's works and those of Freud, similarly to the way Marion Vlastos drew similarities between Lessing's and R.D. Laing's philosophies. Despite this, experiential perspectives on Ballard's work, including Francis's, are primarily characterised by a focus on an abstract rather than personal/autobiographical subject as the determinant of the meaning of Ballard's work and the perspective on reality it represents. Though the relative importance of the inner landscape of the human mind in preference to the physical landscape of external reality is something accepted by his critics, his characters are never read as particularly nuanced in psychology or motivation (Francis, 2011, p. 65). Francis, therefore, focuses not on the psychological structures of either Ballard's fiction or his characters. Instead, Francis mainly deals with how psychology and psychoanalysis influences the composite perspective on reality adopted by Ballard's fiction.

Part of the reason for seeing Francis as an experiential critic is the level to which he relies upon the thematic affinity of Ballard's work with various psychological theories. Though remarking that his approach will "primarily" engage with "the textuality of Freud's theoretical work and its intertextual relations with Ballard's writing", in practice Francis is interested in the way Ballard's fiction consciously draws upon psychological, especially Freudian, concepts as discrete ontological strategies, rather than as seeing the two as parallel textual entities (2011, p. 23). For example, Francis begins a chapter devoted to Ballard's short fiction by remarking that "in its earliest phase Ballard's short fiction drew heavily on the conceptual resources of Freud's theoretical writing", before looking at the way short stories such as "Manhole 69", "Zone of Terror" and "The Watch-Towers" engage openly with psychoanalytical concepts (2011, pp. 30-37). One of the strongest examples of the insight this focus on psychoanalytic influence can give into Ballard's work can be found in his first novel (discounting the disavowed *The Wind from Nowhere*) *The Drowned World*. Fitting the above described elision of the boundary between mind and world, the external climatic change that takes place in the novel is mirrored by the psychological regression of the protagonist and several other characters, whose "growing isolation and self-containment" is "symptomatic[...]of a careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic" (Ballard, 2008a, p. 14).

As Francis notes, the way this psychological shift is portrayed has clear resonances with psychoanalytic theory, especially Jung's concept of the collective unconscious (2011, pp. 68-69). The explanation given to Kerans, the protagonist of *The Drowned World*, by another character for the psychic regression he is undergoing is that "just as psychoanalysis reconstructs the original traumatic situation in order to release the repressed material, so

we are now being plunged back into the archaeopsychic past, uncovering the ancient taboos and drives that have been dormant for epochs” (Ballard, 2008a, pp. 43-44). Francis’s examination of Ballard’s fiction focuses not, then, on the way his language fits certain psychoanalytical paradigms. Instead it is on how the experience of the world presented in the novels is influenced by and parallels psychoanalysis and other psychological theories.

If this focus on influence links Francis’s criticism with that of experiential critics such as Roberta Rubenstein and Marion Vlastos, another aspect of his approach distinguishes it from them and fits a tendency particular to the experiential criticism of Ballard’s work alone. As mentioned above, the personal psychological structure of Ballard’s characters is of little interest to Francis – instead the external landscapes of Ballard’s fiction are themselves seen as internal elements of a single psyche. To expand on this briefly, I feel this is evidence of the abstract nature of the subjectivity which is the focus of experiential critics like Francis and Gasiorrek. The personality of Ballard’s protagonists cannot be linked to either a designated group of real subjects or to the author himself because they often only seem like one aspect of a larger whole. This is in contrast, for example, to the way that Martha in Lessing’s “The Children of Violence” demonstrates an independent subjective progression as a mimetic interpretation of a real human being.

The characters of Ballard’s fiction often seem only to be playing an ensemble role within the wider subjectivity of his work. In *The Drowned World* for example Keran’s psychological development, or “archaeopsychic” regression, receives very little attention from the narrative when there are no ‘normal’ characters present to compare him to – hence the hiatus in the middle of the book between the departure of Riggs and the arrival of

Strangman. Conversely, Martha's abnormal psychological development at the end of *The Four-gated City* is specifically portrayed in isolation from other characters – both in the diegetic sense that Martha confines herself in a room on her own and in the stylistic sense that the narrative shifts into first-person mode. For Francis, subjectivity in Ballard's work is best examined through the city submerged in a Triassic lagoon in *The Drowned World*, or the chrome and concrete, perpetually moving, landscape of *Crash* rather than the statements and obsessions of Ballard's protagonists. In such a reading, the protagonist of Ballard's works is important primarily as a perspective – both a passive observer of the alien landscapes of his works and the vector of their subjective distortion. In this case I mean less that the meaning of Ballard's fiction is controlled by the selfish agenda of an unreliable narrator (though this is important in a stylistic reading), but that seeing from the perspective of a particular figure causes a sort of distortion which is almost optical in nature. This is a role somewhat akin to that of a lens which distorts imagery not by virtue of any agency or agenda but due to focus, the thing that enables us to see being the very reason for distortion.

Francis sees Ballard's works as "psychological in a far broader sense, translating and reinscribing Freud's psychodynamic theories into the concrete and plastic languages of the contemporary motorway landscape, flirting with the psychotic possibilities of the imagination as it searches for new modes of individual liberation and excitement" (2011, p. 2). For Francis the "inner space" of Ballard's fiction can be read at times unambiguously as "psychological space" (2011, p. 65). Francis recognises that such straightforward readings of the concept of "inner space" have been problematised by Luckhurst's assertion that such a term "cannot finally be determined under a single definition" (Luckhurst qtd. in Francis,

2011, p. 65). In support of his own reading, however, he points towards Ballard's remarks in an interview that "by 'inner space' he meant a specifically 'psychological space'" to legitimate the importance of this "trope" to an understanding of Ballard's fiction (Francis, 2011, p. 65). This is again demonstrative of Francis's tendency to focus on Ballard's fiction as an experience of reality, a focus which contrasts with the technical and theoretical analysis displayed in Luckhurst's close discussion of the meaning of a particular term.

Francis's perspectival experiential approach can be justified through Ballard's statements about his fiction and in the way his protagonists present their experience to the reader. In his prologue to *Crash*, Ballard argues that the inner world of the psyche, with its neuroses and obsessions, has become the major force in shaping external reality. Ballard argues that the "distinction between latent and manifest content", that which separates the 'meaning' and the 'appearance' of a dream in Freudian psychoanalysis, "now needs to be applied to the external world of so-called reality" (Ballard, 2008c, p. iv). This quote also supports Francis's contention of the importance of Freudian thought to Ballard's fiction. Ballard's protagonists enact this externalisation of psychic material in the way they accept an almost perfect symmetry between the external world and their inner thoughts. Sanders, the protagonist of *The Crystal World*, travels at the beginning of the novel to an area of African jungle that is the site of a profoundly strange phenomenon. Due to a "leaking away of temporality" caused by the collision of time with "anti-time", the remote zone deep in the jungle has been undergoing periodic waves of 'crystallisation' as trees, animals and people are encased in crystal and temporally suspended (Gasiorek, 2005, p. 33). Despite the alien nature of this phenomenon Sanders describes it as eerily familiar, comparing it both to the way Wordsworth describes childhood in *The Prelude* and to leprosy, an obsession with the

latter being one of the elements of the minimal characterisation Ballard gives this protagonist (Ballard, 2008b, p. 19, 69, 84). One of the main reasons for the familiarity of the crystal jungle is its status as a psychic landscape, an experience which seems to shift according to the impulses of a central intelligence.

When we present such an understanding of Ballard's fiction as 'psychoanalytical', however, it is a type of psychoanalysis which seeks the excavation and familiarisation of unconscious thought. The elision of the boundaries between the inner psyche and external world is also a dissolution of the split between the conscious and unconscious minds. For the desires of the unconscious mind to be made 'manifest' in the external world, its content must be excavated and made, even if only partly, comprehensible. In a way that is similar to the experiential approaches studied in previous chapters, Francis's psychological approach to Ballard's work is dependent upon a unified, experiencing subject, whose perspective is key to our understanding of the novel. In previous chapters I have argued that this interpretative subjective function is enacted through our empathetic connection with the protagonist, who then connects us to the world of the novels. In most experiential readings of Ballard's novels the protagonists and the external reality of their novels are parts of the same whole – to comprehensively understand them requires an understanding of the psychological elements of external reality as it appears in Ballard's fiction. This is perhaps the most compelling reason for the perceived lack of characterisation in terms of Ballard's protagonists – the nuance of Ballard's characters is in the strangeness of the landscapes of the novels. The argument that Ballard's characters lack depth is less convincing if each character, along with the arresting visual elements of Ballard's work, is a part of a unified whole – a composite within which the protagonist is both a passive centre of perception and a source of

distortion, as the external landscape shifts to match the preoccupations and obsessions that are allocated to him.

This, I would argue, is the same fundamental point that lies behind the argument of another critic, though without the sole focus on psychological theory of Francis. Andrzej Gasiorek's perspective on Ballard's work also relies on the coterminous nature of the protagonist's perspective and the external reality of the novels' world. Gasiorek does provide a comprehensive survey of different critical approaches to Ballard's work, including praising Luckhurst's reading of Ballard's work as an exercise in "cross-breeding genres and unsettling the boundaries between them" (2005, p. 2). Despite this, Gasiorek's own perspective is based on a composite understanding of Ballard's fiction as an extended attempt by a central subject to comprehend a surreal external world. In contrast to Baxter's focus on Surrealism as aesthetic praxis in Ballard's work, for example, Gasiorek characterises Ballard's use of Surrealism primarily as a method of understanding reality, of overcoming "divisions – between self and world, the rational and irrational, the conscious and unconscious – sublating them in a liberatory synthesis" (2005, p. 9). Like Francis's use of psychoanalysis, Gasiorek sees Surrealism (though it plays a more secondary role in his analysis) principally as a response to the phenomenology of reality which shares an affinity with Ballard's own perspective, manifested in the experiential framework of his fiction.

When it comes to analysing Ballard's novels themselves, the "uncertain ontological status" of events leads Gasiorek to prioritise "the meanings imputed to them by the novel's protagonists" (2005, p. 30). The fact that such an approach recognises the influence subjectivity has over the way events and objects appear in Ballard's novels does not lead to

an analysis of them as unreliable accounts of actual events – instead they are seen as so focused on a particular subjective perspective that the distorted material itself, rather than any truthful narrative lying behind it, is analysed to determine the meaning of the work. Though the idea of Ballard himself as an experiencing subject is less important to such an analysis as Gasiorek's, the abstract idea of a central, experiencing figure is vital to it. No small part of the reason for this is the collapse or obsolescence mandated by many of Ballard's novels of the social institutions that define the boundaries of communal reality. For example, the doomed, tattered remnants of society in *The Drowned World* are symbolic of a shift "from the exigencies of public policy to the freedoms of private speculation, always for Ballard the guarantor of the imagination's autonomy and power" (Gasiorek, 2005, p. 35). The ability of the individual perspective to transcend restrictive social structures is a factor that almost all of the experiential perspectives highlighted in this thesis rely upon to an extent. In terms of Ballard's work the *resilience* of this perspective in the face of forces which destroy traditional social institutions is part of the way the meaning of these novels hinges around a single perceptual centre – this representing a more fundamental liberation of the individual imagination than that portrayed in Lessing's "The Children of Violence", a series in which individuals never fully leave behind the shaping influence of wider society.

Because it is so central to the way Ballard's work communicates its perspective on reality, a reader is required to put a great deal of trust into the veracity of the protagonist's worldview. This is not to say that Ballard presents his main characters as straightforwardly mimetic devices, rather that the phenomenological material of each novel is presented as the perspective of a single subject untroubled by the 'real' or 'unreal' status of the world they experience. The narrators of Ballard's works are remarkably singular in their focus on



the protagonist's point of view, especially when compared to the way that third-person narrators in Lessing's and Rhys's novels puncture their own focus on a single protagonist with the direct portrayal of the thoughts and feelings of others. This sort of narrative empathy is absent from Ballard's work, an absence which can be interpreted in an experiential sense as a subordination of the role of character as a portrayal of numerous separate 'selves' to the overarching sense of Ballard's novels as a unified perception of reality – a single self whose perspective the reader relies upon absolutely. Above I argued that a 'psychoanalytical' reading maintaining this unity relies upon the dissolution of the split between unconscious and conscious minds. For the purposes of the wider argument of this thesis such a split is analogous to the way the language and structure of Ballard's work engenders mistrust in the protagonist's perspective when read in isolation – this split must be discounted, therefore, to read Ballard's novels in an experiential way. In relation to the trust Gasiorek places in the protagonist's perspective I would note that such approaches ignore the possibility that the protagonist's interpretation of the world is a divided, ambiguous one.

Even if the world of Ballard's novels is a subjective or psychological landscape, the "uncertain ontological status" of elements may point toward the ambiguous nature of the subjective "meanings" which Gasiorek relies upon to interpret Ballard's work, divided as they are between a subjective story that implies unity and a mode of discourse which rejects both unity and subjectivity. To give an example of this, at the end of *The Drought*, a novel which portrays the near complete desiccation of Earth's landmass after pollution impedes the evaporation of water from the ocean, the protagonist Ransom sets out alone across a barren desert. Significantly, he fails to notice that it has begun to rain. For Gasiorek this

moment is a “final folding of exteriority into interiority” which “not only emphasises that the two dimensions have been blurred in the story just narrated but also suggests that the inner reality has been the more significant of the two” (2005, p. 40).

The blurring of ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’ that Gasiorek highlights is partially a recognition of the stylistic complexity of Ballard’s novels, in that the subordination of external reality to the internal mind is accomplished through isolated narrative techniques, as well as through the puncturing of the reader’s trust in the ‘reality’ of the novel’s preceding events. As mentioned in the introduction, however, the distinction between experiential and stylistic readings is one of emphasis. For Gasiorek Ballard’s novels are fundamentally accounts of the lived experience of a particular subject (even if this is often an abstract one). In the case of the above example, the fact that Ransom has not noticed that it is raining is for Gasiorek a subversion of the reality of the events of the novel, since Ransom’s perspective is absolutely indispensable in mediating the novel’s events.

That being said, for Gasiorek at least the protagonist’s perspectival autocracy does not suggest a single ethical or philosophical interpretation of Ballard’s work – we cannot for example entirely side with the protagonist’s wholehearted enthusiasm for the ‘new meaning’ promised by the latent sexuality of the car crash in Ballard’s *Crash* for example, since “the moral questions raised by the book go to the heart of its still perplexing ambiguities” (Gasiorek, 2005, p. 83). Despite this, I would still contend that Gasiorek’s reading of Ballard’s work displays something of an undue faith in its reliance on the individual perspective. Something I will return to below is the way the protagonist of *Crash* presents himself as passively compelled to participate in the melange of technology,

violence and sex making up the landscape of the novel. If the reader uncritically accepts this presentation the protagonist appears as a figure only able to observe as he and those around him become “characters so powerfully in thrall to the logics of a fantasy technology that they are bereft of the ability to locate themselves in social space if they are not somehow placed there by way of mediation” (Gasiorek, 2005, p. 84).

In Gasiorek’s reading of Ballard’s work then the power the protagonist has over his world is limited to portrayal and observation – in terms of morality, ethics and agency he is firmly controlled by the aberrant logic of the novel’s composite mind. As with Jean Rhys’s protagonists, however, this self-presentation of the subject as ‘passive but perceptive’ conceals his or her unconscious compromise, as an agent, in the aberrant imagery of the text. In *Crash* the protagonist, while convalescing in hospital, states how empty he feels the “pantomime of regret” of his wife and hospital staff is in relation to the man he killed in the crash he caused (Ballard, 2008c, p. 25). Later, however, the protagonist himself feels he should “launch into a formal apology” when meeting the dead man’s widow (Ballard, 2008c, p. 55). In this there is a discrepancy between the protagonist’s attempt to portray himself as someone no longer able to exist according to traditional moral codes and the fact that he still recognises and is drawn towards the behaviour mandated by them. The discourse of the novel is split between the imperative to present a ‘new’ world in which morality does not apply and the need to be able to communicate this world to readers. The style the novel is written in brings moral standards with it, even if only to be transgressed. This contradicts the protagonist’s claim that he exists (is compelled to exist) in a world without ethical boundaries.

Though other experiential perspectives on *Crash* take a more definite line on its ethics, the fact that this never betokens a critical dissection of the protagonist's perspective suggests a key quality of experiential approaches to Ballard's work – their trust in the perspective of the central protagonist and the phenomenology of the world it offers to the reader. For example, Jean Baudrillard's reading of the novel is as an almost jubilant assertion of the fading of the boundaries between simulation and reality in modern life. Baudrillard, perhaps as one would expect, is interested in the novel primarily for what it says about the general human experience of a reality lacking the accepted divisions between the real and unreal. Most notably, Baudrillard states that:

In *Crash*, there is neither fiction nor reality—a kind of hyper-reality has abolished both. Even critical regression is no longer possible. This mutating and commutating world of simulation and death, this violently sexualized world totally lacking in desire, full of violent and violated bodies but curiously neutered, this chromatic and intensely metallic world empty of the sensorial, a world of hyper-technology without finality—is it good or bad? We can't say. It is simply fascinating, without this fascination implying any kind of value judgment whatsoever (1991)

I would tentatively state that Baudrillard's perspective can be regarded as experiential because of this uncritical faith in the truth of the perspective through which this “hyper-real” experience of reality is transmitted. A less sophisticated point to make is the repetition

of the word “world” in the above quote, implying that Ballard’s novel is for Baudrillard a reality system rather than a textual object. Furthermore, though much of what Baudrillard writes is contrary to what we might term the traditional concept of subjective agency, the nature of the world he portrays is a subjective one – seen from the perspective of a single individual without reference to the social codes which are rapidly becoming an irrelevance. In many ways the world Baudrillard reads in *Crash* is one in which everything has been stripped away apart from the subject as centre of perception. This is perhaps clearer in the light of Bradley Butterfield’s study of the affinity between Ballard’s fiction and Baudrillard’s philosophy, in which he remarks at one stage that “[m]orality is never explicitly thematized in Ballard or Baudrillard, yet one senses in their writings a critique of late capitalist forms of morality in favour of a deeper sense of personal liberty and justice through aesthetic revolution” – in this reading of Ballard’s work the “aesthetic” perspective of the individual imagination is valued over the faulty moral codes of communal reality (1999, p. 66).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, considering the above-mentioned antipathy of Baudrillard’s perspective toward most definitions of ‘subjectivity’, his reading of *Crash* was opposed by other critics, including some who read the novel from an experiential perspective. Most notably, Vivian Sobchak, one of the critics invited to respond to Baudrillard in a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies*, argued against this prioritisation of simulation on the basis of her *own* experience (1991, par. 26-29). Sobchak’s critique is based on the very real nature of suffering and pain to the subject concerned, making the abstraction Baudrillard employs to discuss its portrayal in *Crash* “dangerously partial and naively celebratory” (1991). As part of this she refers to her own body and a scar she has received “from major cancer surgery on my left distal thigh”, inviting comparison with the

grievous injuries suffered by the novel's characters (Sobchak, 1991, par. 28). Sobchak does not feel that the novel itself trivialises suffering – in fact, the opposite is true. Sobchak's deployment of her own experience is an endorsement of a reading of the novel as a warning about the aberrant way in which the body and technology are beginning to intersect in the modern world, as well as a method of arguing that Baudrillard, far from correctly reading the way human beings experience reality, is precisely too abstract and too removed from experiential immediacy.

The idea of the novel as a warning is an understanding of it endorsed by Ballard himself in the preface to the novel. Yet it is Ballard's own response to Baudrillard's criticism in the same issue of *Science Fiction Studies* which I feel suggests that the novel's use of morality may not be entirely in earnest. Ballard, in a very short response, enjoins postmodernist criticism to leave science-fiction unanalysed, to "Stay your hand! Leave us be!", remarking that "bourgeoisification in the form of an over-professionalized academia with nowhere to take its girlfriend for a bottle of wine and a dance is now rolling its jaws over an innocent and naive fiction that desperately needs to be left alone" (Ballard, 1991, par. 30). Bradley Butterfield draws attention to Ballard's curious exemption of Baudrillard's criticism, to which he is seemingly replying, from this judgement, along with a "sense of dread or Unheimlichkeit" in Ballard's statement that Baudrillard's essay was something that he did not "really [want] to understand" (Butterfield, 1995, p. 65; Ballard, 1991, par. 30). My own explanation for Ballard's dread of theory is the fact that he is trying to protect the careful balance sought by his fiction – its violence and morality are both an experience, something to be deplored or endorsed, and an ethically neutral structural device.

Ballard positions his characters and events in such a way as to keep the reader in an optimal position, preserving his work's radicalism in the process. From a stylistic perspective, the reader needs to perceive the novel from within a restrictive moral code, as a warning in short, to understand the possibility of that code being surpassed or made obsolete. This is one explanation for the way *Crash* displays the obsolescence of traditional moral codes not by ignoring them but by denying them, reinforcing the reader's role as a creature of traditional morality. Any understanding of the novel as either moral or amoral is inadequate in capturing its essential ambiguity – morality is both an essential part of the way his characters relate to the world, even as they surpass outdated ethical codes, and an arbitrary structural construct, included for the stylistic reason that it facilitates a certain positional relationship between reader and text-object. This sort of reading of Ballard's work, with its implication that its style can influence content as well as the other way around, is something neglected by the approaches studied above. To summarise briefly the nature of experiential criticism in Ballard's work, it is characterised by a prioritisation of a single perspective – one which encompasses the entire reality of Ballard's fiction. While eschewing the importance of the experience of the author himself to the interpretation of this perspective, they implicitly rely upon the fact that the novels imply a subject, even though the critics studied here disagree about the nature of the reality that this subject exists within. This leads to similar insights and weaknesses as those linked to experiential criticism in previous chapters. The critics studied so far provide a useful resource in studying the preoccupations and worldview of Ballard's fiction as a whole, while they neglect the specific structures and literary techniques used to communicate them.

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The nature of the criticism of Ballard's work studied above has involved a refinement of what characterises the experiential, a focus on what is essential in a comprehension of it as a part of a framework for understanding the ambiguity of the work of these three authors. In a similar way, the work of two stylistic critics, Paul Youngquist and Jeannette Baxter, can in their visual but not perspectival analysis of Ballard's work help to refine the key qualities of the stylistic. Firstly, as a bridge from the previous section, Youngquist's reading of *Crash* can in many ways seem to share many similarities with the approaches to this novel studied above. A "perspectival" approach like Gasiorek's after all is also partly a visual one in the sense that much of the subjective phenomenology it relies upon is visual in form – the arresting imagery of the jungle in *The Drowned World* for example. What distinguishes Youngquist's reading of *Crash* from those studied above, however, is its assertion that the imagery of the novel, far from *implying* a subject actually negates the concept of one.

In this version of the novel, the world of *Crash* is a "space of two dimensions, a surface without depth" (Youngquist, 2000, par. 3). Eliding a dimension in this way also elides the presence of a subject in the novel – the narrative appears as a series of still photographs, albeit evoked by language, to the eye of the reader. Whereas for experiential critics the imagery of Ballard's novels is formed by the mediation of the protagonist, a side effect of the story they tell us, for Youngquist such imagery is formed directly by the language of Ballard's novel. The boundaries between inanimate and animate matter, "between humanity and machine" blur and dissolve, leaving a world of surface in which "Contiguity, mark of the



metonym, regulates relations[...]As a result things lose substance. Boundaries lapse and features merge. Where difference once distinguished, contiguity now associates, deferring the substantive identity of things” (Youngquist, 2000, par. 3). Subjectivity, in the sense of a self which proceeds from an identification with the body (as in the ‘illusory’ subjectivity Lacan defines as the mirror stage) has no place in such a world since:

a body without depth ceases to be an organism in the traditional sense. If to have a body means to inhabit a suit of flesh, then organic substance sets the terms for life, its aims and its ends. But in Ballard’s world, the technological world of late industrial culture, semiotics subsumes substance. The vital, active organism gives way to the conceptual, abstract image. (Youngquist, 2000, par. 4)

The role of characters in this series of images is as props or as signifiers for something else. A photograph of the protagonist taken by Vaughan, the “hoodlum scientist” who instructs Ballard in the hidden meaning of the car crash, connects Ballard, a woman he is having sex with and the car they are in through the mediation of the camera lens. The picture shows a “chromium window-sill and its junction with the overstretched strap of the young woman’s brassiere. By some freak of photography these two formed a sling of metal and nylon from which the distorted nipple seemed to extrude itself into my mouth” (Ballard, 2008c, p. 81). The meaning this photograph takes on overrides Ballard’s initial feeling of violation at Vaughan’s intrusion – he realises that the photograph has very little to do with him at all. The picture is instead an exercise in geometric precision, a folding of the human subjects

into the metallic structure of the car. This is not to say that Vaughan's motives are not sexual. It would indeed be foolish to suggest that *Crash* is at all asexual, or that sexuality did not run through almost every line of the novel. Instead, what Ballard's novel does is expand the concept of sex to encompass the inorganic, so that "sexuality plays upon a surface that embraces [both] the material and the organic" (Youngquist, 2000, par. 3).

It was mentioned above that Ballard's naming of the protagonist of *Crash* after himself could be read as a frank acceptance of the experiential status of the novel. If, however, subjectivity is seen as something specifically pre-empted by the semiotic landscape of the novel, then it can seem more like an empty gesture or stylistic manoeuvre – the protagonist may as well be called Ballard since there is no need to sustain the reader's belief in the novel as a fictional world. Disregarding a figure he views as an empty proxy, the character Youngquist places at the centre of his analysis is Vaughan, suiting his focus on the textually formed imagery of Ballard's novel. The first chapter repeats the name Vaughan almost compulsively, followed almost always by an active noun, such as "Vaughan hurtled up the concrete ramp, an ugly machine, sprung from a trap" (Ballard, 2008c, p. 2). As Youngquist puts it, "[f]rom its first sentence to its last, *Crash* pursues the image of Vaughan, its narrative alpha and omega" (2000, par. 2). This focus on Vaughan supports Youngquist's elision of the subjectivity suggested by the novel. This is because the reader only has access to Vaughan as a symbol, as "the condition of narration". His internal thoughts and feelings are never part of the narrative.

This focus on Vaughan leads Youngquist's analysis to a blind spot similar (though arrived at from an opposite direction) to that described above in relation to Gasiorek's over reliance on

the veracity of the narrator's perspective. Since Youngquist fails to recognise the protagonist's influence over the imagery of the novel at all, he ignores the possibility that the novel is distorted by perspective. For different reasons, there is a potential reading of the novel which both experiential and stylistic critics ignore – it appears only in the split between them, as it were. This is the possibility that the status of the protagonist as an agent is something he represses so as not to take responsibility for his increasingly perverse actions. For example, despite the fact that his own accident and many of the unusual feelings it awakens predate his meeting of Vaughan, Ballard is always very clear that Vaughan is the one through whom he “discovered the true significance of the automobile crash” (Ballard, 2008c, p. 3). It is the tone and the repetitiveness of the way Ballard's protagonists abdicate themselves from responsibility that suggests their self-delusion. Structurally this is part of a presentation of the protagonists as semi-moral creatures still able to communicate with readers who remain within the remit of a functioning moral code. On an experiential level *Crash* successfully presents, in a *morally* ambiguous way, a view of the modern world as a landscape in which technology and sexuality are beginning to interact and merge in increasingly perverse ways. A stylistic reading of the novel undermines this, however, in the sense that this experience is only possible through a designed text, one in which the *impression* of a neutral perspective on reality is only enabled by numerous tricks and positional manoeuvres. An example of this careful design is the relationship between the amoral Vaughan, the morally ambiguous protagonist and the moral reader in *Crash*. The ambiguity of this is only fully apparent however if the characters of Ballard's fiction are seen both as based in an evocation of subjectivity and playing a discrete technical role.

Youngquist, fittingly, reads *Crash* as a single surface – and both his and experiential

readings of the novel could be criticised as being relatively one-sided. I would contend, however, that a sense of the novel as a single side is not fundamentally incorrect. It would be over simplistic, as the above shows, to suggest that it is a simple case of combining the two readings to get a comprehensive “two-sided” understanding of the novel. In a topological sense a single surface can involve concealment – a Möbius strip, for example, is a surface with one ‘side’ but one which cannot be fully viewed from a single perspective. In fact, it is the very act of observing such a shape which results in its seeming impossibility, as the eye resolves the illogical form of the strip into both a two-sided and a one-sided shape. In a psychoanalytical sense, seeing the model of the unconscious-conscious mind as either one-sided or two-sided is to misunderstand its topological structure. This relates to *Crash* in the sense that the ‘single’ surface of the world is only constructed at the cost of a repression of both the possibility of it being a limited perspective and the nature of the protagonist as an agent – these factors are hidden through a twist in the fabric of the novel, the same ambiguous approach to naming, perspective and morality which Ballard attempted to protect in his intervention in the critical debate surrounding the novel.

Jeannette Baxter’s visual perspective on Ballard’s novels is similar to an extent to Youngquist’s. Baxter’s approach may also seem to best fit the template of an experiential critic, due to the above-mentioned affinity between a “visual” focus on the imagery of Ballard’s work and a sense of them as perspectival landscapes. Baxter’s use of a “limited form of intentionalism” in her reliance on Ballard’s own statements about Surrealism could also seem to suggest an experiential focus (2009, p. 12). However, the methodology of Baxter’s approach is decidedly stylistic in its small-scale focus on particular elements of Ballard’s work, meaning that the images of Ballard’s works are for her abstract, textual

entities, as opposed to elements of experiential phenomenology. Baxter's deployment of Surrealism is more than anything else as praxis, a way of creating artistic forms rather than of understanding reality. For example, Baxter criticises Gasiorek partly for neglecting the "extent to which Ballard *experiments* with Surrealist *poetics* and politics for a contemporary audience", displaying an overriding interest in the technique and style of Ballard's fiction (2009, p. 13, emphasis mine). Though Baxter makes clear in her argument that a reader engages with Ballard's work as a series of "visual experiences", her critical perspective primarily focuses on the way these isolated "experiences" and moments function as textual machinery – in short, how the visual framework of the novel is textually constructed (Baxter, 2009, p. 8). This includes the "re-viewing" of "a number of texts which were illustrated originally" as well as an in depth analysis of the paintings Ballard names in works like *The Drowned World* and *The Drought* (Baxter, 2009, pp. 13, 17-57).

Like Youngquist then, I would say that Baxter reads Ballard's novels as visual but not perspectival. Though Baxter sees imagery as essential to Ballard's practice, it is not evoked for her as the viewpoint of a particular subject. Furthermore, the drive to access the unconscious, a key goal of Surrealism, is for Baxter principally a historical phenomenon and a matter of technique. What interests Baxter is the way this drive leads Ballard to experiment in ways similar to those of the Surrealists and what this means for the historical and ethical interpretation of his fiction. This disregard of the subjectivity of Ballard's fiction influences the way Baxter interprets particular events and elements of his novels. For example, certain experiential critics contend that the enthusiasm of the protagonist toward drastic climatic changes and shifts in the fabric of reality in novels like *The Crystal World* is something that should be taken seriously as an ardent desire for social collapse and

apocalypse – a large scale rendering of the Freudian death drive (Francis, 2011, 91-92). In such a reading the perspective of the protagonist points toward either a positive attitude toward the new nature of reality or that of a passive reporter, warning of their danger.

Baxter, however, sees the irruptive elements of the ‘disaster novels’ as equally corrupt as the vestiges of human society that surround them, in direct contrast to their appearance in the eyes of the protagonist. For example, the crystallisation of the forest in *The Crystal World* works as a seductive “metaphor for the post-war consumerist spectacle” and as an implicit criticism of colonialism (Baxter, 2009, p. 49). Such a judgement is based upon a small-scale focus on particular elements and the tone of Ballard’s fiction, along with a disregard of the centrality of the protagonist’s perspective. The superficial showiness of the way the crystal forest is portrayed, as well as its resonance with the use of crystal in the works of other artists, is more important in Baxter’s interpretation than the protagonist’s fascination with it. For Baxter such elements of Ballard’s fiction are not just morally ambiguous but potentially ironic, meaning that the novels are less experiential evocations of real (though possibly psychological or otherwise immaterial) phenomena, more sets of symbolic images deployed to communicate specific messages.

There is no need, however, to disregard either interpretation of the nature of the irruptive elements of the disaster novels. What I would argue is the most important aspect of their nature is their utter strangeness in comparison with ‘normal’ reality – I feel that a reader is meant to partly share the fascination of Ballard’s protagonists with the surreal Crystal Jungle, for example, or with the submerged city slowly turning into a Triassic lagoon in *The Drowned World*. At the same time I believe that Ballard’s novels aim to repulse us, with the

ardency with which his protagonists head to their deaths in both *The Crystal World* and *The Drowned World* for example, or in Sanders's perverse obsession with leprosy in the former. Our connection with the protagonist's experience of the world is purposefully undermined by the idiosyncratic style of the novels as well as by the frequency of ironic moments that undermine their interpretation of reality. To give another example of this, one of Ballard's later novels, *Millennium People*, details a full scale middle-class revolt of those sick of having their moral codes and mores exploited by the rich and powerful. The seriousness of the rebellion according to its participants is consistently undermined throughout the novel by a strong sense of irony, a diminishing of the seriousness of the concerns that lie behind the revolt. Rather than lessening the subversive force of Ballard's fiction, such a fictional technique actually enhances it by keeping the reader in a permanent state of uncertainty. In this way, Ballard's novels provide a view on a space free of social and cultural norms for those who must continue to exist within them.

Though Luckhurst's reading of Ballard's work differs most radically from the autobiographical guise Ballard's fiction adopts in the mainstream, his focus on the generic and structural experimentation of Ballard's work, along with his highlighting of particular features that undermine a sense of it as a composite whole, mean that his approach also contradicts that of a more nuanced experiential critic like Gasiorek. The fact that Luckhurst sees Ballard's fiction as engaged in structural manoeuvre relative to fictional and philosophical forms makes the way it evokes a subjective experience of reality of less interest. For Luckhurst, Ballard's work evokes "landscapes" that redound with the "suggestibility of meaning never achieved". In this view, novels like *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women* are "narratives precisely about their own positionality and

transgressiveness" (1994, p. 704, 706). What such a methodology does enable is a more detailed focus on the significance of particular moments and stylistic touches in Ballard's fiction. Where the popular approach to Ballard's 'autobiographical' novels *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women* viewed them as either sequential or, at the least, iterations of an extended attempt at understanding the same set of real-life experiences, Luckhurst highlights those features that separate the novels and make them independent textual artefacts. Under close textual scrutiny, it becomes clear that "*Kindness* is far from a reprise" of the earlier novel (Luckhurst, 1994, p. 695). Among many other discrepancies, Luckhurst notes that "of the three opening chapters" of *The Kindness of Women*,

the first predates *Empire*, the second would need to be inserted between parts 1 and 2 of *Empire* (which jumps to the end of internment rather than detailing any time between arrival and the weeks before release), and the third at points openly rewrites *Empire*. There is, for example, a casual reference to the bombs at Nagasaki and Hiroshima: "Some of the prisoners even claimed to have seen the bomb-flash" (42); those prisoners, in *Empire*, include Jim himself, and this gesture seems to defuse the vital image-chains of apocalyptic light in *Empire* (Luckhurst, 1994, p. 695-696).

Rather than prioritising theme or the general feeling of the work, Luckhurst focuses on particular textual features and their bearing over the interpretation of the novel as a whole. For example, the "casual" reference to the bomb in *Kindness* contrasts with its use as a



profoundly important device in *Empire*.

As in previous chapters, this is not to say that such a stylistic approach is superior to a composite, experiential understanding of the novels, merely that the validity of Luckhurst's different emphasis supports the ambiguity of Ballard's fiction. As an example of the meaning suggested by a different emphasis Gasiorek, though remarking that *The Kindness of Women* and *Empire of the Sun* "are to be read as *versions* of the past, not as definitive reconstructions", broadly links the two books together in their preoccupation "with the question of identity and the ambiguous role played by the imagination in its formation" (2005, p. 149). Both critics highlight different elements of novels that are ambiguous and multifaceted enough to support these diametrically opposed interpretations. Though Luckhurst asserts that the intricacies of Ballard's style are dedicated to positioning his work in an "uncertain non-site between science-fiction and the mainstream" (in short that they maintain its ambiguity) his argument of uncertainty is in the service of a particular interpretation (1994, p. 688). Luckhurst, though arguing convincingly that Ballard's works function based on "an irreducible core of unreadability", ignores the subjective connection a reader forms with the narrative voice of Ballard's work, largely due to an understanding of Ballard's novels as textual rather than experiential entities (1997, p. 12).

What this leads Luckhurst to dismiss are the features of the novels that point to their place within a unified whole. Thus, for Luckhurst, the isolated features and "different emphasis" of *The Kindness of Women* in relation to *Empire of the Sun* are more important than the continuity of theme between the two novels in determining the novels' meaning (1994, p. 696). What I would contend is that both aspects need to be allotted equal importance in

terms of Ballard's novels, even and especially at the times when they contradict each other. This is something which holds for all of the opposing insights into Ballard's fiction generated by experiential and stylistic approaches. To summarise briefly the essential features of the two approaches as they relate to Ballard's work: experiential critics read Ballard's novels as a subjective evocation of reality, while stylistic critics see them primarily as aesthetic or semiotic exercises. Below, I attempt to balance these potential interpretations equally in reading Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

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In terms of its formal inventiveness, *The Atrocity Exhibition* differs from the rest of Ballard's work more than *Good Morning, Midnight* or *The Golden Notebook* differed formally from the rest of Rhys and Lessing's respective oeuvres. Though Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is, as explored above, a profoundly experimental and complex novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition* exists in a grey area between novel, short story collection and abstract word collage. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is made up of numerous separate sections that contain miniature plots, episodes and imagery. The sections themselves are further fragmented into headed paragraphs which relate to each other thematically but can seem at first to lack any concerted narrative progression. The publication history of the work is also relevant to any judgement over what sort of literary text *The Atrocity Exhibition* is. Each 'section' was originally published as a standalone work, "mainly in magazines such as *New Worlds* and *Ambit*" in the second half of the 1960s, before being collected together (Holliday, 2013). The

first collective publication of them was by Jonathan Cape in 1970, a year which also saw the pulping of Doubleday's American edition after the company's president flicked through a copy and spotted the section "Why I want to Fuck Ronald Reagan".

Modern editions of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, however, owe most to the republication of the work by RE/Search. This 1990 "large format, extensively illustrated, paperback edition" also included annotations written by Ballard, along with four additional sections (Holliday, 2013). The annotations along with a preface by William Burroughs have been retained in the latest, Fourth Estate/Harper Collins edition, though the illustrations were not, the annotations were moved to the end of the section they were originally found within and the number of additional stories present in an appendix is reduced. I use this non-illustrated 2006 edition in the below analysis since I believe that the text alone highlights the ambiguity and complexity of this work, while the additional paratextual material of the preface and annotations provides useful background. That being said, I feel that the appendix is best left out of this analysis due to the above-mentioned conflict between editions.

This complex publication history has led to confusion over what to classify the book as. In many ways, the orientation of a critic vis-à-vis the stylistic experiential split can be assessed according to how they read the work's unusual form and provenance. Experiential critics invariably accept it as a novel based on the explicit links between sections along with their broader thematic consistency. Stylistic critics highlight the almost fractal fragmentation of the novel's sections and paragraphs, as well as the original separate publication of the former. Gasiorek, though recognising that it is in many ways "a collage of condensed novels" in that each "chapter functions as a self-enclosed entity in its own right", highlights the way

the “chapters” of *The Atrocity Exhibition* interact “in suggestive ways” and have “shared preoccupations” (2005, p. 16-17). In contrast Baxter deals comprehensively with the original publication of the sections as “15 separate textual fragments”, tracking the “formal and contextual modifications across four versions of the work” (2009, p. 14). Though this is partly due to the fact that Ballard originally published the pieces alongside striking images, supporting Baxter’s contention of the visual nature of Ballard’s work, it also suits a conception of the book as a “dissident Surrealist collage” (2009, p. 14). More superficially, Gasiorek also consistently uses the terms “chapters” when referring to the work’s constituent parts and “novel” when referring to the whole, while Baxter describes it as being “composed of fifteen *short stories*, or chapters, which coalesce by their very lack of narrative coherence” (Gasiorek, 2005, p. 17; Baxter, 2009, p. 59, emphasis mine).

I feel that a choice between reading the work as a fragmented collection of abstract word-pictures and as a unified, if experimental, novel is a false one. Both potential readings are justified by the text. As such, I aim to use a relatively neutral terminology in describing the different elements of the work. Rather than use either the word “chapter” or “story” to refer to each of the originally independently published parts of the book, I believe the word “section” best captures their ambiguous status. Furthermore, from this point on, I will use the word “fragment” to describe the headed paragraphs that make up most of the sections. This captures both their potential independence from the sections but also the sense of a thematic link – they are separate parts of a potential whole. Such an approach is I feel justified by the explanatory material Ballard has provided to the novel. In a short prefatory note Ballard remarks that:

Readers who find themselves daunted by the unfamiliar narrative structure of *The Atrocity Exhibition* – far simpler than it seems at first glance – might try a different approach. Rather than start at the beginning of each chapter, as in a conventional novel, simply turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the ideas or images seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an interesting way. Fairly soon, I hope, the fog will clear, and the underlying narrative will reveal itself. In effect, you will be reading the book as it was written. (AE, p. vi)

On the one hand this presents *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a distinctly non-linear exercise in style – a reader might flick through the book like a magazine seemingly without regard to any diegetic progression between the novel's sections. Ballard also distinguishes the book from a "conventional novel" and highlights its "unfamiliar structure". This note also, however, recognises that a reader's natural impulse when faced with a text made up of series of sections with a certain thematic consistency is to approach it as a novel, with a coherence imparted by an experience of it as subjective reality.

Aside from this note, the other non-literary material present in the text can also be read in a conflicting way. As mentioned above, when revising the novel for republication by RE/Search Ballard wrote explanatory material on many of the fragments. In one sense this implies that each fragment has an independent meaning which can be gainfully illustrated by supporting information without reference to the whole. Yet, much of the content of the

glosses supports a reading of the novel as a unified, single story. Many of the glosses relate to Ballard's own experience and motivation, highlighting the presence of a central experiencing subject as creator of the abstract forms that make up the text. For example, after the section "Summer Cannibals" Ballard states that the beach (a frequent setting in both the fragments of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and in Ballard's other fiction) in the fragment "Locus Solus" "is a generalized version of San Juan, near Alicante in Spain, where I once pushed my tank like Armstrong-Siddeley to 100 mph on the beach road, and where my wife died in 1964" (AE, p. 99). The other personal material attached to the sections implies that the novel's fragmentation can be resolved as a response to personal trauma. The need to portray this experience effectively as traumatic however means that this experiential link can never be firmly substantiated. Indeed, this link is actually undermined by a narrative style that obviates the concept of the subject in an attempt to communicate the damage caused by trauma. The division between stylistic and experiential elements can be extended therefore to the paratextual material attached to the novel partly in order to explain it – rather than accomplish this these annotations lay bare the ambiguity of the process that formed the novel, its genesis in an unhealable split between traumatic experience (which may or may not be Ballard's own) and the impersonal language it cannot be framed within.

The 'story' of the work can be said to follow the experience of a troubled central figure, whose name shifts though his obsessions and way of responding to reality remain relatively constant. This figure is named with a limited set of variations on a two syllable surname beginning with T, such as "Traven", "Travis" or "Talbot". Another gloss, again working in a partly experiential way, remarks that the differing names and identities are all based upon the central identity "Traven", "a name taken consciously from B. Traven" a novelist Ballard

admired “due to his extreme reclusiveness” (AE, p. 36). From an experiential point of view this figure, called Traven here when referring to the character in a general sense, is at the centre of the novel’s inexplicable events, even as the form of the work shifts further and further away from traditional modes of narration. In early sections Traven is a genuine protagonist, engaged in numerous surreal projects in a desolate and over-determined landscape. In later sections Traven’s ‘story’ is relegated to the headings of fragments. Despite this he remains something of a link for the reader to the world of the novel. This is also the case in relation to the other characters that make up the novel’s cast, including superficially real figures like Dr Nathan, Karen Novotny and Catherine Austin as well as figures more obviously presented as hallucinatory elements of Traven’s tortured psyche like Coma, Kline and Xero. The names of these figures do not shift, suggesting that their role within Traven’s experience of the world is something that can be analysed progressively and collectively.

These names can work as an invitation to the reader, a suggestion that the repeated forms of behaviour the characters display represent the possibility of understanding the reality of the novel in experiential terms. In this interpretation of the novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* is a subjective world that can be made familiar through reference to learned experience. Such a reading of the novel can only be sustained in looking at the text’s narrative in a comprehensive way, resolving its fragmentation by reading it as a symptom of subjective trauma or otherwise psychologically or subjectively precipitated. In a stylistic sense, the fact that the name of Ballard’s protagonist shifts could indicate that his subjectivity is as empty a gesture as the naming of *Crash*’s protagonist James Ballard seemed in stylistic terms. Furthermore, drawing a sense of character from the consistency of the behaviour of

particular characters ignores the strangeness of their actions when studied in isolation as well as the possibility that they are merely repeating the same overdetermined, structural roles. As an example of the latter, the character Dr Nathan, though keeping the same name and personality throughout the book, plays a simplistic, almost technical role in each fragment in his laboured explanation of the meaning of Traven's actions. The naming of characters in the novel then can work either as a link to experience or as an empty, stylistic gesture.

Widening this ambiguity, reading the text on the basis of its thematic consistency works to cement it as an experiential subjective novel, while examining each section or fragment on a progressively smaller scale increases a sense of the novel as a fragmentary aesthetic exercise, one which can be interpreted only through an external theoretical framework. In an example of the former, if Ballard's novels can be read as explorations of the inner landscapes of their protagonist's minds then *The Atrocity Exhibition* can be seen as a tale of the protagonist's mental dissolution in the face of a chaotic media landscape, worsened by the personal trauma he himself has experienced. This interpretation fits Jakob Winnberg's description of *Atrocity* as focused on the experience of "a continual trauma that [Traven] actively participates in by incessantly repeating a few key scenarios with minor variations" (2011, p. 86). The free association produced lists are typical of this, revolving around similar images and concepts: the biological, the famous, the photographic, the technological. The "repetition-compulsion" of the book is "geared towards the restitution of lost significances", an attempt to apply a meaning based on past experience to the unbridled chaos of media, personal and social stimuli a subject is bombarded with at any one time (Winnberg, 2011, p. 87).



On one level therefore Traven is a traumatised central subject, the experiential link that enables a reader to immerse themselves in an otherwise chaotic (and therefore mimetic) perspective on reality. Yet, as Winnberg goes on to argue, “[t]o read the narrative as concerning one man’s melancholic and psychotic response to trauma is to bracket the sociological and ontological context it establishes for its main protagonist” (2011, pp. 96-97). The shift in Traven’s name might imply the instability of his identity, damaged by the traumatic moment, or it might imply that he is a representative of “a media landscape that is itself traumatising and traumatic”, the object of trauma rather than the subject (Winnberg, 2011, pp. 97). If this is true then the way traumatic discourse is shaped in the text is more important than any subjective experience it might imply, since this discourse represents a judgment wider than the psychological pathology of any hypothetical subject.

The presence of ‘trauma’ in any case supports the ambiguous status of the novel in both experiential and stylistic terms. A ‘traumatic’ (in the sense of a fragmented and repetitive) literary style complicates any attempt to connect with the ‘traumatised’ subject that it implies in that it refers to an experience that defies symbolisation. The more unified and empathetic the protagonist seems, therefore, the less their experience can be described as traumatic, meaning that an experiential critic must choose between a connection to the protagonist’s world and a comprehension of the traumatic inability to properly communicate experience. Escaping this difficulty by reading the ‘discourse’ of *The Atrocity Exhibition* as traumatic (as Maren Linett did in her approach to Rhys’s work) could lend insight to the interpretation of the fragmentation that characterises the style of the work. The absence of an actual subject problematises such a strategy, however, since the stronger an analysis of ‘traumatic’ discourse is (the more it explains the reason for fragmentation);

the more it undermines the characteristics of blockage and inaccessibility which justified the analysis in the first place. The novel defies both those interpretations highlighting its potential narrative consistency and those focusing on its endemic fragmentation.

My own reading of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is as a novel, even if this must be qualified with the recognition that it undermines such a label even as it invites it. Perhaps the best way of demonstrating this is to pick one particular fragment of the novel and aim to show how it can be read simultaneously on three separate levels depending on what level of coherence with the rest of the work it is allowed – with *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a whole, the section it lies within, or none at all. Traven's former colleague/psychiatrist, Dr Nathan often provides explanatory information for his actions in an authoritative scientific manner. Following the first three sections, in which we have become just used enough to Nathan's explanations to be slightly irritated with him, the section "You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe" contains the paragraph titled "A Silent Tableau" in which Tallis stands on a deserted beach, alone until a helicopter circles and lands, depositing Nathan:

After a pause, during which he scrutinized Tallis closely, the psychiatrist began to speak. His mouth worked silently, eyes fixed on Tallis. He stopped and then began again with an effort, lips and jaw moving in exaggerated spasms as if he were trying to extricate some gum-like residue from his teeth. After several intervals, when he had failed to make a single audible sound, he turned and went back to the helicopter. (AE, p. 58)

Considering this fragment as entirely independent, a reader's focus is drawn to the way it creates suspense by delaying the revelation of Nathan's muteness until the last possible moment. At the beginning it seems as if Nathan is actually speaking. Next a subtle note of dissonance is introduced by the phrase "His mouth worked silently". It is only with the penultimate sentence of the paragraph that we are made certain that "he had failed to make a single audible sound". In terms of the section "You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe", the fragment functions by bringing the sparseness of dialogue to the reader's attention. The only reported speech is to be found in two instances when Tallis speaks to Coma, a woman who is probably a figment of his own imagination (*AE*, pp. 52, 58-61). The section as a standalone story has that familiar prioritisation of the visual and the psychological familiar from much of Ballard's fiction. The other elements of "You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe", the apocalyptic beach, the modern concrete buildings, the joyless, compulsive sexual liaison, work as a kind of make-your-own-Ballard-story kit, similar to the deadpan and obscene "Karen Novotny" kit Nathan talks about in a later section (*AE*, p. 84). The most coherent way of reading the scene is to place it into continuity with Dr Nathan's previous interventions in Traven's experiments, found in preceding sections. One possible reading of the scene on the silent beach is one in which Nathan's interpretative discourse, only familiar to the reader from previous sections, runs dry when faced with its living breathing subject. The encounter between them is evidence of a traumatic moment, one which is profoundly resistant to Nathan's understanding.

In a way, though I have presented it as a particularly linear way of looking at this particular sequence, placing a section such as this in the context of the work as a whole in many ways supports the balance the novel maintains between fragmentation and linear narration.

Nathan's inability to speak and provide a meaning for the section works as a warning to the reader about imparting a composite meaning to the novel – such interpretations are only sustainable at a remove from the subject of interpretation. At the same time, this very warning is only present if the reader has already approached the text as having a certain level of narrative consistency – it as such undermines that which it relies upon to create meaning. The 'Möbius-like' nature of this split is clear in the way the stylistic experimentation of the work is only enabled by the traditional, experiential, narrative consistency it contradicts and undermines. The inverse is true in that the nature of the novel as a protracted subjective experience of trauma and fragmentation mandates a narrative style which undermines its very status as a consistent novel.

Reading *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a single narrative is something which requires conscious effort on the part of the reader. In many ways, however, it is this which makes it a much more mimetic work than many classically realist novels. The very task of making reality comprehensible is something which requires conscious effort, faced as we are with the endemic fragmentation and chaos of media-saturated reality. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is a simulacrum of existence within a reality increasingly dominated by the transmission of tropes of war, commerce and sex in all forms of media and simulation. Our role as experiencing subjects in forming this chaotic landscape into something logical and comprehensible is something the novel invites and also undermines. Because of this any attempt at interpreting the novel solely as either the experience of a traumatic reality or as a progressive destabilisation of subjectivity through experimental literary technique is inadequate. Instead, like the other novels studied in detail in the previous two chapters, *The Atrocity Exhibition* lies firmly in a grey area between the two dominant strategies of

interpreting this author's work. Though much of this chapter has been concerned with distinguishing Ballard's fiction and the critical responses to it from those studied in previous chapters, this has been part of a strategy of examining what is essential in the functional split between two aesthetic elements that I feel characterises the fiction of these three authors. I have attempted to show that any theoretical basis for the opposed categories of the experiential and stylistic invariably falls short at capturing what is, finally, a literary distinction, a way of reading the novels of these three authors without resorting to reductive interpretations.

## Conclusion

The ambiguity of the work of these three authors is something I hope to have maintained despite the numerous definite interpretations referenced above. This is especially the case in regard to the three novels, *Good Morning Midnight*, *The Golden Notebook* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*, subjected to closer analysis above. Though these novels differ greatly in both the way they are structured and the stories they impart to a reader, I feel I have identified common ground on the basis of this persistent ambiguity. The Möbius strip has been used above as an analogy for this, since it is a useful way of understanding the nature of the split I believe characterises them while at the same time possessing additional meaning as a model of the split between the conscious and unconscious minds. In practice, I have tried to separate my own use of psychoanalytic concepts from their relationship to real-world phenomena. The Möbius strip is most relevant to these novels in the sense that the split between stylistic and experiential elements is both a fundamental one – the way *The Golden Notebook* is written does definitely conflict with its promise of subjective wholeness, for example, and is a key part of its message – and an arbitrary one enabling the goal these novels share of delaying interpretation.

The ambiguity I read in these novels is as such multi-layered, present at every level of analysis. There is no way to avoid the uncertainty that surrounds these novels by retreating to a level of analysis ‘outside’ or ‘above’ it. I would not contend, for example, that my argument resolves this uncertainty by defining the ambiguity of these novels as an arbitrary fictional technique. This would be a stylistic argument neglecting the fact that these novels

are also based on experiences – they claim the right to make ethical and philosophical judgements about the nature of reality, rather than merely experiment with textual forms. In the same way that Shosana Felman noted the way that the structure and plot of *The Turn of the Screw* echoed in critical readings of the novel, I would suggest that this multi-layered ambiguity redounds in critical responses to these authors' work. Just as the stylistic and experiential elements of Ballard's, Rhys's and Lessing's novels contradict each other, so the criticism based on each element displays a neglect and contradiction of the other which is at the same time a mutual reliance. This is because the 'excavation' of the element (often referred to above using the analogous definition of the 'unconscious' element) which a particular critic sees as vital to an understanding of the novel or novels under analysis is generally preceded by an argument that a focus on another element is too prominent and common ('conscious' to use another psychoanalytical analogy). Examples of this given above include Maria Reventós portrayal of the stylistic focus of early reviewers of Rhys's work and Roger Luckhurst's criticism of the autobiographical, experiential focus of Ballard's reviewers and interviewers.

Rather than try to escape the continuation of the novels' ambiguous split in the criticism that surrounds them, either through resolving it or imposing a theoretical interpretation which explains it, I have tried in the above to gradually refine a framework for its perception. In the first two chapters I spent more time considering the affinity of particular theoretical models with either stylistic or experiential readings of Rhys and Lessing's work. As the argument progressed, however, I have tried to focus more strongly on what the essential definition of the split is, using the abstract nature of subjectivity in the criticism of Ballard's work as a catalyst for this refinement. That being said, the minimal qualities of the stylistic

and experiential that resulted from this can be seen to form the basis for the similarity that I believe connects the works of these authors. In the novels of each writer what I would describe as the experiential is characterised by a progressive development of subjectivity and the way the works of each author have a unique way of looking at the world. In an experiential reading unified self-identity is suggested as both a goal (especially in Lessing's work) and an extant alternative to the flaws and pathologies of communal reality and social structure. The stylistic refutation of this subjectivity stems from both the fact that each author wishes to portray this subjectivity as complex and delay its resolution, as well as the fact that the mode of expression, linguistic discourse, is affected by the social flaws that experiential immediacy was meant to escape.

As I explored in the introduction Lacanian theory is especially illustrative of this last point, especially in its exploration of the paradoxical fact that subjectivity can only be expressed in language which is resolutely impersonal. The reason, however, I have steered clear of using this as an interpretive model for the ambiguity I read in the novels of these three authors is because this would run the risk of losing sight of their literary nature. To return to another concept used in the introduction, as soon as recourse is made to a framework which provides the possibility of categorising and comprehending the way a particular text functions, the defamiliarising operation which gives a text its literary nature is lost. With that in mind I do not seek to understand or resolve the ambiguity which I feel is present in Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing and J G Ballard's work, merely to present it as an essential aspect of their status as works of literature.



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